Lecture 9: Phase 3 – Saussure & 'Modern Linguistics'

Objectives
1. Revise the complexity of Language (its psycho-physical, social & historical nature)
2. Birth of Modern Linguistics: Saussure's solution to the **Gordian Knot**[1] of Language dualities

1. Language: Gordian Knot of Contradictions

In his lectures on General Linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure presented his students with a real problem; he asked,

> Where do we find the linguistic phenomenon in its concrete, complete, integral form? Where do we find the object we have to confront? With all its characteristics as yet contained within it and unanalysed? This is a difficulty which does not arise in many other disciplines - not having your subject matter there in front of you.
>
> (Saussure: 1910)

Indeed, in other sciences, like biology, physics or chemistry, we have concrete objects and processes that we can examine, hypothesize about, experiment and observe through our physical (or technologically extended) senses. But where, indeed, is that Language that we should /could observe? The more we think about it, the more puzzling the tangle of contradictions that is 'Language' appears to be:

The Physical Nature of Language

Language is not just our 'organs of speech'[2] – we may have our tongues and lips, but that alone will not enable us to speak Amanab or Chinese! You don't even need your tongues and ears to communicate in Sign, the language of the deaf. And yet, our ability to produce /perceive speech sounds, and the speech sounds themselves are undeniably part of all human languages (apart from Sign). Saussure warned that

> It would be a mistake to believe that this integral, complete object can be grasped by picking out whatever is most general. The operation of generalisation presupposes that we have already investigated the object under scrutiny in such a way as to be able to pronounce upon what its general features are. What is general in language will not be what we are looking for; but nor must we focus on what is only part of it.

The physical organs we use to communicate abstract meaning – be they our tongues and ears or hands – make up only the ***physical*** part of Language, perceivable through our senses of hearing and sight:

> It is clear that the vocal apparatus has an importance which may monopolise our attention, and when we have studied this articulatory aspect of languages we shall soon realise that there is a corresponding acoustic aspect. But even that does not go beyond purely *material* considerations (Saussure: 1910).

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[1] **Gordian knot**: n. a difficult or apparently impossible problem or task. **Idiomatic expression**: to **cut the Gordian knot** – to solve a difficult problem in a direct or forceful way, rejecting gentler and more indirect methods (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 1995)

[2] Edward Sapir, an American linguist of first half of the 20th century, warned that 'We must not be misled by the mere term [***organs of speech*** – OT]. There are, properly speaking, no organs of speech; there are only organs that are *incidentally* useful in the production of speech sounds. The lungs, the larynx, the palate, the nose, the tongue, the teeth, and the lips, are all so utilized, but they are no more to be thought of as primary organs of speech than are the fingers to be considered as essentially organs of piano-playing or the knees as organs of prayer' (Sapir: 1921).

The Psychological Nature of Language

Another part Language, **psychological**, is our knowledge of the sounds, words, and structures of the particular language we speak. This knowledge is stored in our memory, which is the property of our physical brains, but is not physical in itself (you can't touch, smell, taste, hear or see memory).

Meaning is the most important aspect of the psychological nature of language – in fact, meaning is the whole purpose/ function of language! It is difficult to 'pin down' meanings, since they only exist in our minds (not in the objective, material world). Hamlet put it beautifully:

> There is nothing that is either good or bad,
> But thinking makes it so.
> <div align="right">Shakespeare: *Hamlet*</div>

This intangible, invisible knowledge of word meanings and of how to put words together to create ever larger chunks of meaning makes up the *psychological* part of Language.

The Psycho-Physical Basis of Speech

The fusion of the physical and the psychological in Language is <u>indivisible</u>. The physical aspect of language (our ability to articulate and perceive speech sounds, as well as the sound patterns / words themselves) cannot be separated from its psychological aspect: a word without a meaning is empty sound, and thoughts are born by the words that define them. Saussure captured this duality of language when he said that

> ***It is the combination of the idea with a vocal sign which suffices to constitute the whole language***.
> <div align="right">Saussure: 4 November 1910. Retrieved 29 September 2008 from</div>
> <div align="right">http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm</div>

✋ **:**

Saussure also said that

> '… the acoustic image linked to an idea - that is what is ***essential*** to the language. It is in the phonetic execution that all the accidental things occur; for inaccurate repetition of what was given is at the root of that immense class of facts, phonetic changes, which are a host of accidents.'

1. How do you understand Saussure's words? Apply your argument to the use of Tok Pisin in Port Moresby (or any other part of Papua New Guinea).
2. Which aspect of human language, do you think, is more important – psychological or physical?
3. Can the same ideas be expressed in different human languages, or will they be 'lost in translation'?
4. What, if anything, do all human languages have in common?

Language is not the function of a special organ biologically adapted for the purpose of speech production (like eyes are for seeing, ears for hearing, lungs for breathing, etc.). Speech is a very complex network of adjustments – in the brain, in the nervous system, and in the articulating and auditory organs which *together* create *symbolic* thought. Language brings together physical forms representing ideas and thus creates meaning in the minds of the speakers.

The Social and Historical Nature of Language

This tangle of psycho-physical aspects of language is not the end of the story; there are many other strands in the complicated knot of Language, i.e.,

Social: 'If we take the combination of the idea and the vocal sign,' asked Saussure, 'we must ask if this is to be studied in the individual or in a society.' The answer is, of course, that:

⇒ We all speak differently: our voices, intonation and manner of speaking are unique; no one individual sets the standards of language use in the community; even the same person speaks differently at different times (imagine the ways you speak when you are angry, sad, or when you have a blocked nose! ☺).

⇒ Therefore, it is the Language in the collective mind of the society that is the object of our study.

Saussure explained it this way:

> Language is **a 'social product'**; You can conjure up a very precise idea of this product - and thus set the language, so to speak, materially in front of you - by focussing on what is potentially in the brains of a set of individuals (belonging to one and the same community) even when they are asleep; we can say that in each of these heads is the whole product that we call the language. We can say that the object to be studied is the hoard deposited in the brain of each one of us. Doubtless, this hoard, in any individual case, will never turn out to be absolutely complete. We can say that *language always works through a language*; without that, it does not exist.

✋ :

Think about the meaning of this statement, and explain it in your own words:

*"Language always works **through** a language; without that, it does not exist"*

Historical: Like everything else around us, societies live /change in Time and Space. The symbolic systems they use to create meaning (including Language) also change with time, place and circumstance. Look, for example, at how cultures and languages of Papua New Guinea have changed in the past 50 years! Is the way you speak today different from the way your ancestors used language?
Even at the same point in time, Language varies: people use language differently, depending on who they are, where they come from, what they want to say, who they are talking to, etc. (the way we talk to our 'buddies' is different from the way we would speak in a formal situation, i.e., at a job interview, exam, etc.).
There are also dialects and jargons, marking regional, social class and other demographic differences in language use. If you talk to people from different walks of life and from different parts of the country, you will notice some variation in the way people use Tok Pisin or English, for example; this is due to the diversity of the speakers' life experiences and the influence of their Tok Ples and culture.

✋ : Give 5 examples of regional variation in the way Papua New Guineans use Tok Pisin.

Hint: Think of how British, American, Australian, Irish, Indian, or PNG 'Englishes' differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, etc.

Saussure was one of the first scholars[3] to see Language as one **COMPLEX WHOLE**. He puzzled over its distinct 'complementary facets, each depending on the other':

> (1) The ear perceives articulated syllables as auditory impressions. …One cannot divorce what is heard from oral articulation. Nor, on the other hand, can one specify the relevant movements of the vocal organs without reference to the corresponding auditory impression.

> (2) But even if we ignored this phonetic duality, would language then be reducible to phonetic facts? No. **Speech sounds are only the instrument of thought**, **and have no independent existence**. Here another complementarity emerges, and one of great importance. A sound, itself **a complex auditory-articulatory unit**, **in turn combines with an idea, to form another complex unit, both** *physiologically* **and** *psychologically*. Nor is this all.

> (3) Language has **an individual aspect and a social aspect**. One is not conceivable without the other. Furthermore:

> (4) Language at any given time involves **an established system and an evolution**. At any given time, it is an institution in the present and a product of the past. At first sight, it looks very easy to distinguish between the system and its history, between what it is and what it was. In reality, the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them. … There is no way out of the circle.

✋ **:**

As we remember from Lecture 1, Saussure was puzzled by the dualities of Language – they all seemed like separate strands, all twisted in a knot; he then concluded that:

> However we approach the question, no one object of linguistic study emerges of its own accord. Whichever way we turn, the same dilemma confronts us. Either we tackle each problem on one front only, and risk failing to take into account the dualities mentioned above, or else we seem committed to trying to study language in several ways simultaneously, in which case the object of study becomes a muddle of disparate, unconnected things. By proceeding thus, one opens the door to various sciences - psychology, anthropology, prescriptive grammar, philology, and so on - which are to be distinguished from linguistics. These sciences could lay claim to language as falling in their domain; but their methods are not the ones that are needed.

Can we draw sharp divisions between the methods used by all these sciences? Why?/Why not?

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2. Saussure's Solution: Structuralism

Only one approach to the multiple contradictions and dualities of Language could, in Saussure's view, loosen this intractable knot: focus on linguistic STRUCTURE, which he saw as the only thing that is '*independently definable*,' concrete, 'something our minds can satisfactorily grasp':

> The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern and relate all other manifestations of language to it (Saussure: 1983).

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[3] Wilhelm von **Humboldt** (1767-1835), a German scholar, had voiced similar thoughts on language and linguistics almost a century before, but the extent of his influence on de Saussure is uncertain (Robins: 1995)

Since Language has 'no discernible unity,' Saussure saw only one way out of the 'circle of contradictions' – to cut off the pesky tangles altogether, and focus solely on Language structure:

> A science which studies linguistic structure is not only able to dispense with other elements of language, but is possible only if those other elements are kept separate (Ibid.).

✋ :

Why did Saussure take the *structuralist* approach to Language? Why was he so sure that 'A language system, as distinct from speech, is an object that may be studied independently'?

Whereas linguistics in the 19th century expanded our knowledge in highly specialised areas, such as phonetics and phonology, historical and comparative studies, etc., Ferdinand de Saussure looked beyond the 'bits and pieces' of language; he saw language as an integrated *complex structure* of arbitrary symbols (Linguistic Signs), and tried to uncover the underlying structure that 'makes it tick' – the *mechanism* of Language.

Fundamentals of Saussure's Structuralism

Saussure defined Language as a '**system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas**' (Ibid.). He insisted that a language **system** can be *separated/ abstracted* from the complexities of speech and studied on its own, arguing that 'Dead languages are no longer spoken, but we can perfectly well acquaint ourselves with their linguistic structure' (Ibid.).

Please remember these most important points of Saussure's theory:

1. **'Signs comprising a language are not abstractions, but real objects'**: you need only to open a dictionary to see lists of Linguistic Signs (words and phrases), all representing that essential 'union of form and idea.' These, to Saussure, are 'concrete objects' existing in society by virtue of a 'kind of contract agreed between the members of a community.'

2. **'Linguistics studies these *objects* and the *relations* between them'**: i.e., both *units* and *rules* of the system are the '*concrete entities*' of the linguistic science.

3. **Any linguistic entity exists only by virtue of the association between signal and signification** (i.e., form + concept): it stops being a part of language 'the moment we concentrate exclusively on just one or the other.' Each linguistic sign is the association between the *Signifier* (signal, sound form) and the *Signified* (concept, idea).

4. **Each linguistic sign is an integral part of the language system because of its *difference* from all the others**: *cat* is different from *dog*, as it is from *man* or *bird,* etc.; if each sign were not different from all the other ones, the system would simply not be there.

5. *Meaning* vs. *Value* of the Linguistic Sign: words have conventional meanings <u>outside of discourse</u> (words in isolation); <u>in context</u>, their meanings acquire Value through the influence of the other signs in the sequence. Compare:
   a. *Bucket* - a cylindrical vessel used for holding or carrying liquids or solids; a pail (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/bucket)
   b. *To kick the **bucket*** (idiomatic expression) – to die

The Language Mechanism

Language creates meaning through different combinations of linguistic signs. In the language system, according to Saussure, '**everything depends on relations'** between signs. These *relations* and *differences* between linguistic items, he said, are of two kinds:

1. **Linear** (*syntagmatic*): we string words together in speech one after another, because we cannot say two words at the same time; meanings change, if the sequencing (order) of words changes, i.e., compare:

    i. 'A *Papuan Black bit the man*' and
    ii. '*The man bit a Papuan Black*'

2. **Associative**: words form clusters in our memory, based on some similarity, part-whole or cause/effect relationship; that is how, when we perceive words, whether spoken or written, they evoke ideas in our minds:

    > This kind of connexion between words is of quite a different order. It is not based on linear sequence. It is a connexion in the brain. Such connexions are part of that accumulated store which is the form the language takes in an individual's brain (Saussure: 2006).

Saussure saw the 'language mechanism' in the ***simultaneous functioning*** of syntagmatic and associative relations between Linguistic Signs, noting that 'Groups of both kinds are in large measure established by the language. … This set of habitual relations is what constitutes linguistic structure and determines how the language functions. … Syntagmatic groups formed in this way are linked by interdependence, each contributing to all. Linear ordering in space helps to create associative connexions, and these in turn play an essential part in syntagmatic analysis.' (Ibid.)

As you see, in his search for something concrete, tangible, something that 'our minds can grasp,' Saussure deliberately limited his view of language to the structure of concrete **objects** (signs) and **relations** between them; these, according to him, are the '***concrete entities***' of the linguistic science. The goal of linguistics, Saussure felt, was **to describe the mechanism of language**, its structure, in minute detail; and this, he believed, was only possible in isolation from the tangle of contradictions, inherent in live communication /speech. This emphasis on fixed structures/ objects, 'something our minds can satisfactorily grasp' and describe, prompted the ascendancy of the ***descriptive*** approach that flourished in the 20th century and is still dominant in linguistics today.

However, **change, transformation, is an essential property of language**, as it is of any *living structure*. Any attempt to freeze it in time will provide us at best with a poor quality still image of its mechanism – not a video footage of it; studying this still, 'frozen' image of language is like trying to understand chicken behaviour by poring over Zenag chickens in Boroko Foodworld! ☺

References

Saussure, Ferdinand. 1983. *Course in General Linguistics*, 16th printing 2006, Open Court Publishing Company. Ch. 3, pp. 8 – 11.

Saussure, Ferdinand. 1993. *Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics* (1910-1911); http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/saussure.htm (27/06/2008)