Signifying Saussure
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A cursory glance at Wikipedia advises that modern linguistics began in the early 20th century with the publication of *Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand de Saussure. In this paper, I will be making the argument that, while the work has many interesting insights, it does not break with the past, but rather serves as a continuity of a debate among philosophers going back to Plato.

Our first extant commentary on what might be called "linguistics," Plato's *Cratylus*, features a colourful debate between two schools of thought on the nature and origin of words. Heracliteans held that the world, and thus language, exists in a constant state of flux, ever-changing, and that any notion of permanence is an illusion. Parmenideans, conversely, insisted that the baseline of the world *is* permanence, and that what we know as reality, or the particulars of the Many, are all individual manifestations of the original and unchanging One.

The dialogue opens to Hermogenes and Cratylus inviting Socrates in to help resolve a dispute. Cratylus is mocking Hermogenes, suggesting that "Hermogenes" cannot be his true name, for it implies that he is a great crafter of speeches, which he is not. Hermogenes pushes back, saying that his name does not depend upon some preordained definition, but operates as a way by which everyone can refer to him. We can see this when Hermogenes argues the following:

> "I believe that any name you give a thing is its correct name. If you change its name and give it another, the new one is as correct as the old. [..] No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name.[1]"

Hermogenes is arguing for the conventionalist view, that the way we understand the meanings of words is informed by context and usage. To borrow a controversial Saussurian term we will soon revisit, words themselves are arbitrary, and subject to change as convention and culture itself changes. Cratylus holds the naturalist view, which claims that the names we give things carry some intent, and that it is possible for something to have a "true" name which matches its identity and a "false" name which does not. As Hermogenes, despite his name– meaning "of Hermes," the god of communication– is not skilled at giving speeches, Cratylus maintains that his name is false and he must have another, more "true" name.

Throughout the dialogue, Socrates needles at both contenders, advancing arguments from both sides. In addition to the ontological justification, he presents etymologies of names of various gods, and demonstrates how their names fit because they reflects their very essence, that which defines them as gods. While the dialogue employs the term "name" in translation, the same arguments are extended to what we call "nouns." They raise a very important and deep question: if a person, god, object, or action has a "true" name, which can be traced historically and etymologically, where did this name originally start? Socrates alludes to "name-givers" multiple times, implying that at some point in history someone or a group of people "gave" the names. Not only does this seem to parallel the Genesis creation story where Adam names the animals, but it also hints at awareness of some kind of pre-Greek language. These two enduring pillars carry all sorts of implications, not the least of which being that the actual crux of word meanings lies somewhere between them.

The fulcrum upon which both views pivot is origin. When do words come into existence, and when do they disappear? The conventionalists hold that they emerge out of need and use, and, when no longer relevant, gradually fade into the sands of time. While this still implies a sort of beginning

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[1] *Cratylus* 384c-d, translated by C.D.C. Reeve

and end of life for a word, the roots are only as deep as the usage. The naturalists, however, would take the word and follow it back etymologically, claiming that it carries with it a history, and has a deep ancestry going back to some nebulous era, perhaps that of Socrates' "name givers." The question now becomes: do the words which comprise our language emerge as flowers on the branch of a tree with a very long trunk, or are they more like moss which grows and fades away at whim?

Plato hints at this again in the *Timeus*, where he describes a world origin story beginning with a Demiurge, who then creates the gods, and from these gods the known world flows. Do we take the Demiurge to represent Parmenides' One? Does language begin at some point, evolve and expand with usage and time, and if so, what relation could it hold to Plato's forms? Aristotle indirectly addresses this in his *Metaphysics*, seeking to answer how we go from the One to the Many, the form to the instances of the form. Although the *Timeus* and *Metaphysics* focus primarily on origins of the world rather than words, it is not difficult to translate these concepts across domains. While words are not "forms," there are clear parallels in how they seem to function. For example, if an object in space is moved in time, it will then move another object, and so on. Likewise, the words we use to communicate exist in time– for we speak in time– and as time progresses, the words, both in form and function, gradually evolve. Neither Plato nor Aristotle completely satisfied in explanation, leaving the Neoplatonics to argue these points for centuries.

Where Plato used origins in part to illustrate the meanings of names and words, Ferdinand de Saussure took a different approach. A lecturer on language in Geneva, Switzerland, he clearly inspired his students: in 1916, three years after his death, they assembled notes taken from his lectures and published them as his *Course in General Linguistics.* The book's release triggered a renaissance of interest in what we now call "linguistics." Saussure's fundamental theory is that words and language get their meaning, not from context, use, or origin, but from oppositions. His hallmark oppositions include that of language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*), of the signified and the signifier, and of synchronic and diachronic systems. While all are of merit, we will focus on the latter two.

First, the signifier (symbol, word, sign) and the signified (the meaning). Saussure argued that a separation and tension exists between them, and that, similar to what we heard from Hermogenes, that the meaning of a signifier is arbitrary. However, Saussure is more technical and rigorous in his explanation, asserting that, while arbitrary, the meaning is heavily informed by context of related signifiers. For example, when we try to describe what "dark" signifies, it is much easier to express the meaning when we contrast it with "light." Related signifiers contribute to the context, and thus to the meaning. If we expand this example to an entire language, then it becomes clear that all the signifiers of the language enter a kind of unity. This is also why hyper-focusing on an individual signifier will not allow us to capture the entirely of what it can express.

In his *Course*[2], Saussure illustrates this with a very helpful visual aid, a classic chess game. Consider a piece like the knight: it is not defined by being a horse-shaped piece, but by its role in the game and how it interacts with other pieces. If we replaced the horse-shaped piece with a dog-shaped piece, it would make no difference to its role. But we also know that a chess game consists of many moves over time, which brings us to the next opposition.

When reviewing the arbitrary nature of signifiers and how they relate to their signifieds, we are focusing on a mostly static and unmoving language system, similar to a chess player scanning the board and deciding on the next move. Saussure called this the synchronic system, because it captures the relationships within a given time period . If we were to freeze a given language in time, all of the interrelated signifiers and signified meanings would together constitute a synchronic

[2]Part 1, Chapter 3, Section 4

system. But we exist in unfrozen, moving time, just like the chess game. When the player makes next move, the game advances to the next state. When we do this in language, by speaking words, we move through the diachronic system. Where the synchronic system covers the entire structure of language, it is locked in time; by contrast (or opposition), the diachronic system focuses on a single signifier, and follows it through time. The diachronic system rings true to anyone who has studied etymology, and should remind us of Cratylus's argument– in fact, at some points, when Socrates assumes the view of the naturalist, passages from the dialogue look almost identical to parts of Saussure's *Course*.

Some may argue that Saussure's theory "solved" the debate between Hermogenes and Cratylus. Rather than trying to decipher meanings of names and words exclusively through a naturalist *or* a conventionalist lens, the synchronic/diachronic opposition completely reorients our framing of it, allowing us to analyze language on a mathematical grid where the synchronic is the X axis  and the diachronic is the Y axis. By dimensionalizing it in this way, it appears we can resolve the conflict by saying that while Hermes, the origin of Hermogenes' name, was indeed a god of communication, over time the meanings of the words have changed to the point where Hermogenes is right to claim his name through birthright, regardless of his capabilities.

However, this opens the door to several issues which sit unresolved. Let us consider Hermogenes' name a bit more closely. If we take our conclusion on face value and follow the meaning of his name back into time until the moment when the "name-giver" bestows it onto Hermes, we can imagine, in the action of bestowment, a deliberate intent, and even a bond of sorts tying the name to the attribute. Thus, at origin, we have a name which has an explicit meaning, an intended function. As we follow the name through time and it passes through the chaos of arbitrariness, this bond between name and meaning slowly weakens until we arrive at a man who carries a name designated for a purpose he cannot fulfill.

Does this mean there is a time-based relationship, where when a word is "created," its meaning is less arbitrary, and, as it continues to exist in time, the bonds of the original intent weaken to the moment that they shatter, at which point we can collectively decide a word means whatever we want it to mean? How far can we take this? Is there any reason we cannot just start calling the animal with soft fur, pointy ears, and an attitude, a dog, rather than a cat? And further, if a company has a bad reputation, can they simply change their name, swapping one signifier with a bad reputation for a new signifier with a good one? Next, do we have a duty to engage with and use language in a manner to ensure meanings are preserved, to prevent them from being cast aside in favor of arbitrariness? Or is there a balance which happens, a sort of democratic vote among the signifiers, to determine how one ought to interpret a signifier, and why? In these questions lies a deeper one: is language a device by which we see and describe the world, or one by which we create it?

By detaching the sense of meaning from the signifier and leaving the signifier itself as an empty husk, it would appear that Saussure discovered a hidden realm beyond the world of language. Consider the following: if we separate the opposition of *langue* and *parole*, and then, leaving speech aside, focus on the *langue*, we encounter a new opposition, signifier and signified. Saussure's work seems to cast aside the signified and focus on the signifier, but that leaves the signified untouched. Is there, within the signified, a new opposition, perhaps to separate the means by which we interact with *logos* from the *logos* itself? If we revisit the *Cratylus*, this might initially appear to be the case. By imitating Socrates' definition method laid out in Plato's *Sophist* and *Statesman*, Saussure seems to have offered a new proof that there remains plenty of undiscovered territory, despite the philolological work of his predecessors in previous decades.

However, Milman Parry's monumental confirmation of Homer as oral tradition shows us that Saussure was likely just *re*discovering a concept well known to the ancients. To recap, Parry demonstrated, through a rigorous analysis of the use of epithets in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, that chosen descriptors of nouns– bright eyed Athena, for instance– were picked not because of relevance to context, but to match the tempo of the line of the poem: a choice which makes no sense for the written word but is absolutely essential for the spoken. This finding is supported by arguments found in Platonic dialogues like the *Phaedrus* where Plato took aim at writing, decrying the written word in favor of the living, spoken word, the way in which we engage with the eternal *logos*. Plato's complaint, picked up millennia later by Jacques Derrida, was that writing down speech abstracts communication, further alienating us from and weakening our connection to the *logos*.

Although it is clear that the ancients were aware of the realm of *logos* that Saussure surfaced through his binary separations, it is less certain whether Saussure was aware of the ancients' knowledge. In his 1878 *Dissertation on the Primitive System of Vowels in Indo-European Languages*[3], he demonstrates strong familiarity with Ancient Greek, enough to study etymologies of individual words. But does this mean he also *read* Ancient Greek? And if so, did that include philosophical works like Plato? In his *Course* he makes no explicit reference to Plato, but, as we have demonstrated, the book is littered with implicit references. We should also note that the concept of binary oppositions itself looks remarkably similar to observations Aristotle made in the *Categories*. Could it be that his students, who compiled this book from their own notes on his lectures, admired his conclusions but were unaware of his sources? Or was Saussure ignorant of Plato's ideas, and through his own methods discovered an alternate route to an ancient truth known to philosophers but unknown to modern philologists?

In conclusion, while one could proudly state that Saussure's *Course* founded modern linguistics, it is evident that, rather than being groundbreakingly new, his work marked either an unknowing reinvention of or a learned rebirthing and continuation of an ancient investigation. In a rather ironic mimesis, both the subject of his efforts and the efforts themselves seem to bring up the same questions, but in different formats. Just as we might trace a word back in time to an imagined origin, so too can we trace the methods by which we investigate that word.

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[3] Original Title: *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*