

From the *Sign* to the *Passage*: A Saussurean Perspective

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One could reasonably argue that a genuine understanding of Ferdinand de Saussure's conception of linguistics began 1996 with the "discovery" of his orangery manuscripts, made widely available in French in 2002¹ and in published in English in 2006 under the title *Writings in General Linguistics (WGL)*. One could just as easily claim that he was already well understood by many and that the discovery of these writings has only strengthened their arguments. Either way, the progressive discovery of his posthumous writings today – and the extensive philological and hermeneutic efforts that this involves – is currently permitting us to develop new hypotheses both on Saussure's project and its incompleteness (Rastier 2003a: 24). One of these developments is the progressive shift away from the *sign* as a unit of semiotic description in favor of the *passage*. The perspective presented here has been developed over that last few decades, primarily in the works of François Rastier².

Despite having published a huge corpus of linguistic studies from phonetics to German legends, Saussure is still mostly known for a book he never wrote, the *Cours de linguistique générale (CLG)* published in 1916. Having been transposed through three different textual genres (i.e., from lecture notes to oral lectures to student notes to the edited manuscript), it is essentially a "third-hand" work (Rastier 2003a: 5). It is therefore no wonder that the discovery of his writings in 1996, having removed these transpositions, has permitted us to better understand the kind of linguistics he was envisioning as well as the extent to which he has been misunderstood by so many of his critics and fans alike. For example, the linguistic sign is often defined as the union of two "parts" or "faces"- the signifier and the signified. However, Saussure did not see them as two entities linked together: they are simply two different points of view for looking at language. The same applies to his other well-known dualities, including *langue/parole* & *diachrony/synchrony*. These are meant to be methodological distinctions, not an ontological ones. It is also clear that we were developing a linguistics of *parole*, according to which a given sign (i.e., signifier/signified) is inseparably one with its context (i.e., other signs). Furthermore, his conception of *semiology* is highly developed in these manuscripts, whereas in the *CLG*, it is barely mentioned. In the *WGL*, we can see the full force of Saussure's militant non-realism and his radical departure from long-held conceptions of language.

While the fragmentary nature of these writings already presents us with a philological and hermeneutic challenge, Saussure is especially difficult to understand because he breaks away from ancient *topoi* perpetuated through the philosophy of language, as Rastier summarizes:

It is true that it requires some effort to understand a thought that carries out a definitive critique of the millenary *topoi* of western philosophy of language: reference, the substantialism that goes with it, the ontological definition of parts of discourse, the problem of truth, mentalism, the dualism that opposes thought to its expression, the etiological fantasy, mechanism, etc.³ (2009b: 5)

¹ Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Écrits de linguistique générale*. Editions Gallimard, 2002. (*ELG*)

² The online journal *Texto! Textes et Cultures* provides an excellent point of entry into this perspective: <http://www.revue-texto.net/index.php>

³ My translation.

Saussure's project was a search for a method, not a treatise on general linguistics: "Let us not speak of *axioms* or principles or theses. These are simply, and in the pure etymological sense, aphorisms, *delimitations*⁴." (Saussure 2006: 82). As Rastier also points out, it is odd that the success of the notion of "general linguistics", often attributed to Saussure, has been accompanied by the tacit abandonment of historical and comparative linguistics, which he was criticizing and improving (2013: 12). On the one hand, we have this nonchalant iconization of Saussure as the father of modern linguistics; on the other hand, we see the swift dismissal of his conception of linguistics and semiotics as no longer viable. Both cases are largely based on a misunderstanding of his work, compounded by the apocryphal *CLG*⁵.

The collection of Saussure's largely ignored published work and the re-discovered manuscripts provide us with an optimal philological & hermeneutic hierarchy for entering into Saussure's corpus, i.e., published work → manuscripts → student notes → *CLG* (Rastier 2009b: 10). However, many scholars go in precisely the opposite direction, often stopping at the *CLG*⁶. This becomes a significant obstacle when one considers the long list of shortcomings this book presents to us⁷. The most important of these is the fact that the editors – who never attended Saussure's course – inserted passages that are not found in any of the students' notes and that misrepresent his arguments in fundamental ways. For example, the famous last line in the *CLG* was never Saussure's, yet the editors presented it as the "fundamental thesis" of his course: "the only true object of study in linguistics is the [*langue*], considered in itself and for its own sake." (Saussure 1983: 230). *Parole* is presented as being a secondary object of study, but for Saussure *parole* remains *at least* equally important as *langue*. After all, speech is where languages are created, and through which *langue* is accessible. Saussure makes this very clear when he describes *parole* as "an active force and the true origin of the phenomenon subsequently perceptible in the other half of language" (Saussure 2006: 196). The editors distinguished *signification* from *value*, while Saussure did not: for him they were the same thing, which corresponds to his complete rejection the referential conception of language. (Rastier 2009b: 7). In the very important diagram of the circuit of speech on page 27, the editors drew a line between the ear and the brain, which is completely absent in the students' notes. The paragraph that explains this diagram on page 28 has no known source, and yet it is explicitly contradicted Saussure's own writings (Rastier 2009b: 7). While a course given to students does not necessarily represent the cutting edge of a person's theory (Rastier 2013: 5), the editors still blocked "any critical appraisal of their editorial work" (Harris 2003: 32) by excluding the notes of one student (Regard) and not publishing the manuscript sources they did use.

Another long list of can be made of the problems that have emerged from scholarship based primarily on the *CLG*. For example, Saussure's textual analyses constitute about half of all Saussure's manuscripts (around 4,500 pages) – but they are still ignored, even by specialists, to this day (Rastier 2009b: 18). His anagrams are outright dismissed by many. People attribute his study of legends, poetry, anagrams to a "second", "cryptic" Saussure, without seeing that it is directly related to his linguistics. (Rastier 2009b: 2).

⁴ The English translation in *WGL* says "definitions" instead of "delimitations" (2006: 82), but I prefer the latter term.

⁵ Even if we set aside the question the authenticity of the *CLG*, we are already presented with an enormous interpretive challenge, "for what was said in the *CLG* included things that had never been said before, either in French or in any other language" (Harris 2003:13).

⁶ We've had Godel's *Sources manuscrites*... since 1959, but many linguists still continue to place the *CLG* at the center of Saussure's work, and as the point of entry into his corpus. (Rastier 2009b 2). Unfortunately, as Boris Gasparov notes, the gradual discovery and publication of Saussure's unpublished work which began with Godel also coincided with a gradual rejection of Saussure. (2012: 5)

⁷ For a more detailed critique of the edition of the *CLG*, see Bouquet 2004, Harris 2003 & Rastier 2009b.

The editing of Saussure’s manuscripts by Engler and Bouquet is not without its own set of philological problems. On the one hand, the orangery manuscripts are extremely fragmented, improvised and scattered⁸ which makes their genre ambiguous and debatable⁹. On the other hand, the edited and published version of these writings was never approved by Saussure himself. For example, each section corresponds to an envelope labeled by Saussure’s hand, but there was no indication of which order to put them in (Rastier 2013: 3). As Rastier puts it, Saussure *signed it*, but he didn’t give it his *seal* (2013: 4). The editors also gave his writings titles that suggest an academic treatise on language (i.e., *De l’essence double du langage, Écrits de linguistique générale*). (2013: 3). To an extent, the *ELG* is also apocryphal, though not nearly as detrimental as the *CLG*. Fortunately, however, we do have the “diplomatic” transcription loyal to original writings by Rudolph Engler (Saussure 1996) as well as the critical edition of René Amacker (Saussure 2011).

Despite these setbacks, Saussure’s *WGL* clearly contradicts the *CLG* on many crucial points, and it surpasses it in many ways. Rastier sees it as having an intermediary position – like a missing link between the *Mémoire* and the *Cours* –, for it cleanly formulates principles in *CLG* that were simplified by his students and over-manipulated by the editors. (2013: 6). It also sheds light on Saussure’s interest in textual linguistics. For example, in his studies on anagrams and German legends between 1900-1910, he continued to explore his radical dualities: *langue/parole* and *signifiant/signifié*. (Rastier 2013: 6). Ultimately, the *WGL*, particularly the section titled *On the Dual Essence of Language*, offers us a much better point of entry into Saussure’s methodology (Rastier 2013: 6). In the wake of the resurging interest in Saussure’s work today, we are invited to reconsider his notion of semiotics, or *semiology*.

So, how *does* Saussure conceive of the linguistic *sign* and semiotics in general? And what can we make of it today? The *Writings* confirm what was already evident in the *CLG*: his focus was specifically on the semiotics of natural languages as a cultural science, which is fundamentally different from semiotic theories that claim to transcend and/or unify culture and nature. The *Writings* also reveal how strongly Saussure rejected ontology in favor of viewing language as creative action. He was not concerned with the *identity* of linguistic signs in the world, but rather with how linguistic values are constructed.

Today, many semioticians continue to think that the key concept is the *sign* and define semiotics as a “theory of signs” (Rastier 2000: 417). Contrary to this trend, semioticians working from a saussurean perspective place the *meaning* at the very heart of semiotic theory and practice, opting instead for a praxeological perspective that integrates rhetorical and hermeneutic insights. *Meaning* is thus understood as a *practical action* and described in terms of interpretive paths rather than entities or relations. A sign is interpretation itself, never something to be interpreted:

From whichever side language is approached, it contains no objectively delimited and predetermined individual phenomena that necessarily stand out. (The moment one assumes the opposite, as is natural at first sight, one immediately realizes that some fact or other will have been arbitrarily and unsystematically isolated.) (Saussure 2006: 11)

From this point of view, a *sign* could only be a simplified, decontextualized artifact of interpretation. Some semioticians, however, speak as though signs had an independent, pre-existing identity – or even that meaning itself pre-exists the experience of it! Saussure’s rejection of this stance makes it next to impossible to even compare the triadic sign model with the saussurean “sign”. While Peirce

⁸ Gasparov gives a detailed description of this in *Beyond Reason* (46-52).

⁹ For a discussion of the challenge of determining its genre, see Rastier 2013 and Gasparov 2012: 50-52.

himself recognizes that “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” (CP 2.308), he still asserts that it “stands to somebody for something” (Peirce 1955: 99). For Saussure, however, the so-called “components” of his sign (signifier/signified) are inseparably one and therefore cannot “stand for” each other. Furthermore, a sign can never be separated from its context, whether immediate or distant, active or passive, contrary to claims that Saussure’s approach “omits the context of [social] interactions” (Deely 2010: 20).

To even attempt to discuss Saussure in peircian terms is doomed from the outset because the two projects are fundamentally different and incompatible¹⁰. For example, in his critique of Saussure, John Deely offers this interpretation:

In Peircian terms, the Saussurean or, more generally, the semiological notion of sign in its broadest construal is hopelessly deficient, on several counts, for developing any general science (doctrine, rather) of signs. To begin with, the *signifiant* corresponds more or less to the sign-vehicle, but the *signifié* corresponds only partially to the notion of interpretant, and the notion of object signified is entirely wanting in the scheme. (Deely 2001: 682).

This leads him to conclude that Saussure’s “failure to bring this understanding under the rubric of a general theory of signs as he hoped might be possible, by contrast, is a historical failure” (Deely 2001: 686). This assessment of Saussure is misleading because Deely is essentially criticizing Saussure for not following the Poinot-Locke-Peirce-Sebeok tradition, when in fact, Saussure is explicitly breaking away from all realist, logical, referential, and ontological approaches to meaning. Saussure does not fail to conform to the a triangular model. He rejects it¹¹. Saussure’s semiotics of languages was never meant to be – nor should it be considered a part of – a general theory of signs in the peircian sense, and even less a “doctrine” of signs. His *signifiant* does not correspond to the *representamen* at all because it *is* the whole sign *seen from a certain point of view*. The *signifié* may partially correspond to the *interpretant*, but *only* if we separate it from the *signifiant*, which is exactly what Saussure says we should never do. Furthermore, Saussure explicitly distinguishes *signifié* from concept and completely excludes the “object signified” (or referent) from the sign¹². In no case whatsoever can a word be reduced to (i) the relation between a *sign*, a *concept*, and a *thing* (*referent* or *object*), (ii) the traditional *aliquid stat pro aliquo* (Rastier 2003), and certainly not (iii) a relation of correspondence between *two* relations of “standing for” (Kockelman 2013: 51).

In order to continue developing Saussure’s semiotic project, we must abandon the representational conception of language that relies on a pre-formed ontology (Rastier 2003a: 28) in order to conceive of its creativity and its ability to present new ideas. As Saussure said, “the sentence is comparable to the activity of a composer of music (and not to that of a performer).” (Saussure 2006: 64) What we find in Saussure is the groundwork for a theory of creative action (see Rastier 2003a: 28), for relations are always to be constructed, never given¹³. These are fundamental

¹⁰ As Rastier explains, “Their projects are not comparable: Peirce is a philosopher of great stature, a brilliant metaphysician who affirms that man is a sign. Saussure, on the other hand, remains a linguist who guards himself from all belief and even all ontology.” (Rastier 2008: 8).

¹¹ This is especially clear when he talks about the impossibility of *synonymy* in the *WGL*, pp. 49-51.

¹² Paul Kockelman also gives us a peircian reading of Saussure: in *langue*, “Saussure’s signifiers and signifieds map onto legi-signs and legi-objects, or sound images and concepts, respectively” while in *parole*, they “map onto sign-tokens and object-tokens, or words and referents, respectively.” (Kockelman 2013: 54) Yet, Saussure’s *signifier* and *signified* do not correspond to Peirce’s *sign* and *object* in any way whatsoever.

¹³ Contrary to Kockelman’s claim that Saussure’s “relation between relations” accounts for semiotic structure, but *not* for semiotic process (52).

methodological decisions that set him apart from other semiotic traditions, and that we will present below in relation to the notion of the *passage*.

The notion of *point of view* is fundamental to Saussure's thinking. Meaning is made of differences that are qualified by and therefore dependent on the points of view that determine them (Rastier 2012a: 4). Saussure reiterates this point many times in his writings:

- (i) "We need to say: from the start, different standpoints exist; otherwise it is simply impossible to grasp any language phenomenon." (Saussure 2006: 5);
- (ii) "Let us remember in fact that *the object* in linguistics does not exist to start with, is not predetermined in its own right. Hence to speak of an object, *to name* an object, is nothing more than to invoke a particular point of view" (2006: 8);
- (iii) "there is not the least trace of *linguistic fact*, not the slightest possibility of gaining sight of or defining a linguistic fact, without first adopting a point of view." (2006: 9);
- (iv) "No term is valid and definable outside a specific viewpoint, as a result of the total absence of innate linguistic entities." (2006: 55);
- (v) "it would seem to follow that there are *no* linguistic facts... or that there are *as many different classes of linguistic fact as there are points of view*" (2006: 232-233);
- (vi) "A word only truly exists, however one views it, by being sanctioned in actual use by speakers of the language." (2006: 56);
- (vii) "where does the idea come from in the first place that there is a word which has then to be considered from different points of view? The idea is itself not arrived at except from a certain point of view, for it is impossible for me to see that a word, in the midst of all the uses made of it, is something given, and that it impresses itself on me like the perception of a colour." (2006: 9).

From a saussurean perspective, linguistic "entities" are not empirically observable units nor are they "evidence" or "data". They are only the momentary constructs of the interpretive action that assigns value to them (Rastier 2007: 27).

Traditional Western dualism separates the soul from the body, the intelligible from the sensible, and prevents us from acknowledging the autonomy of semiotic mediation, or *semiosis*, as an activity that is neither pure thought nor pure physical reality, but something else. By reducing meanings to representations and signs to physical objects, dualism compartmentalizes the signifier and the signified into separate entities. This allows some linguists see language as an instrument of thought and supports the quest for universals based on the supposed universality of the physical world and the mind. However, it can never account for the irreducible diversity of languages as cultural formations (Rastier 2012: 1). For example, a novel is connected to the physical world through its signifiers, but these are not reducible to purely physical forms, unless you can somehow reduce them to black marks on paper¹⁴, in which case it would no longer be a novel.

Contrary to the dualist tradition that makes the *signifié* a purely mental object and the *signifiant* a physical object, natural language is neither only material nor only mental¹⁵ (Rastier 2009b: 24-25), as Saussure clearly explains:

¹⁴ John Deely defines the text as a relation between a *sign* ("black marks printed on paper"), an *object* ("the terminus of cognitive relations", the "objects of discourse"), and an *interpretant* (the "correlation of marks to objects invisible as signified") (Deely 1999: 132-133).

¹⁵ From this perspective, the semiotic triad of the aristotelian tradition (*sign/concept/referent*) is useless. Just as the *signified* does not represent an *object*, a *signifier* does not represent a *signified*. Because a non-dualist conception integrates signifiers with signifieds, the relation of representation between the *concept* and the *object (referent)* as well as the relation that joins the *sign* to the *concept* are both inconceivable. (Rastier 2012:11)

Langue has a physical side and a psychological side. But the unforgivable error which is found in every paragraph of the grammars is the belief that the psychological side is the *idea*, while the physical side is the *sound*, the *form*, the *word*. Things are rather more complicated than that. It is not true, indeed it is extremely false to imagine there to be a distinction between the sound and the idea. These are in fact inseparably one in our minds. (2006: 41)

Even though Saussure places both the signified and the signifier within the “psychic” domain¹⁶, he explicitly separates them from pure thought and places them in the semiotic “world”. While a *signifié* has its conceptual (mental) correlates, it belongs to language not to thought (2006: 25-26). The same can be said of the *signifiant* (signifier): it may correlate to salient physical forms, but it belongs to language.

Doing away with traditional dualism means that expression (signifier) cannot be a neutral receptacle (e.g., a sign vehicle) of a pre-existing content (signified) and language cannot be a mere instrument of thought (Rastier 2012: 11) or behavior, for it is first and foremost an inherited and socially formed activity that mediates our relation to the world and each other. Language is not an instrument, but rather a *milieu*, a social environment in which we are completely immersed¹⁷. By adopting a non-dualist view, we recognize that languages are between us, not inside us, for even when we talk to ourselves or think in a language, it is still a socially sanctioned and codified activity¹⁸ (Rastier 2000: 441). Thus, by “repatriating” the signified to language, and by distinguishing it from the logical or psychological concept, the content of a “sign” can no longer be universal and must be relative to a specific language.

Classical semiotic theories would have us believe that the *signifier* brings to mind something else that it is not (Rastier 2012: 16), but for a semiotics of *values*, the signifier and signified are inseparably one “in our minds” and mutually definable. The two poles of this duality are not opposites, nor even “opposable”¹⁹ as Saussure insists: “it is wrong (and impracticable) to oppose *form* and *meaning*.” (2006: 3). They are not antonyms, nor even dichotomies. They are merely methodologically distinguished variables that depend on points of view (see Rastier 2012: 27). Thus, we have a duality that is both inseparable and variable. This may seem paradoxical, but only if one ontologizes the sign and its “components” and denies the semiotic world its relative autonomy.

While Saussure radically criticized substantialism, fixism, and reference in order to conceive of the autonomy of the semiotic and to objectify it scientifically (Rastier 2013: 10), he also understood how tempting it is to “re-ontologize” his dualities and separate them into parts²⁰:

¹⁶ Saussure calls the signifier and the signified “the two psychological sides of a sign” (Saussure 2006: 208).

¹⁷ To illustrate this point, Rastier asks, “Would we say that the air in the instrument of birds?” (2012: 24).

¹⁸ Saussure explains: “*Langue* is social, or else does not exist. If the language system is to become established in an individual’s mind, it must first be accepted by the community.” (Saussure 2006: 208)

¹⁹ The signifier is only opposable to the sign as a whole, not to the signified with which it is inseparably one. Likewise, the signified is opposable to the sign, not the signifier. It is in this way that we can account for variability without separating the signifier from the signified, because an interpretive path can establish a connection between the signified from one sign and the signifier of another, which in its turn become inseparably one. For more on this see Rastier 2012: 26.

²⁰ In her introduction to *WGL*, Carol Sanders explains Saussure’s notion of duality in this way: “it is, for example, in the coming together of the speaker’s mental representation of a sequence of sounds with the mental representation of the referent that the linguistic unit, or sign, is to be found.” (Saussure 2006: xix). She is treating the sign as made of two separate things, each endowed with their own identity and “being”, that are put together as though they pre-existed their union, one of which has a relation to a referent. Saussure explicitly rejects all of this.

The only given is the diversity of signs inseparably combined with the diversity of ideas, in a high degree of complexity. These chaoses, when brought together, lead to *order*. There is nothing more vain than wanting to establish order by separating them. Nobody, as we know, would dream of radically separating them. All that can be done is to tease them apart and to take either one or the other one as a starting point, after having made one or the other into something which is meant to exist in itself. This is precisely what we call wanting to separate two chaoses and what we believe to be the fundamental vice of the grammatical approaches we are used to.²¹ (Saussure 2002: 51)

This is why Rastier believes that the perennity of ontology (Rastier 2004: 23) is possibly the biggest reason why Saussure is misunderstood and dismissed and proposes to de-ontologize language.

Let us examine a classic diagram of the Saussurean sign that most of us are familiar with (See Figure 1).

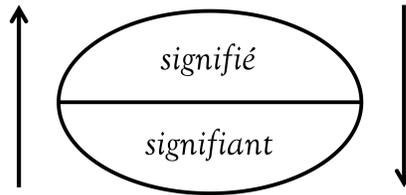


Figure 1. The saussurean sign based on the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1972: 99)

In his own writings, Saussure never places a solid line between the signifiant and the signifié. His intention was never to compartmentalize the signifier and the signified. In fact, Saussure struggles with his metaphors because they often lead to ontology. For example, he abandons the comparison of the sign to a piece of paper because it suggests that the correlation between the two sides of the papers are somehow “fixed and given in advance” (Harris 2003: 221). He makes this all very clear in the “Miscellany and Aphorisms” section of the *WGL* (see Figure 2):

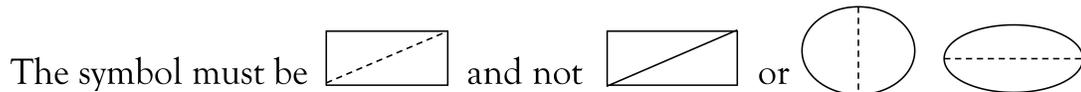


Figure 2. The sign in *Writings in General Linguistics* (2006: 68)

The dotted line de-compartmentalizes the sensible and the intelligible, while the diagonal suggests graduality. It not just a relative *distinction*, but also a *gradual* one: we are more or less in the signified and we are more or less in the signifier (Rastier 2013b). There can be relative and variable degree of dominance between the signifier and the signified, the middle zone being where the signifier and signified are more or less equal. For example, the occurrence of a rhyme in poetry is a moment when the signifier may dominate one’s linguistics perception, while the anticipation of a certain content would be an example where the signified is the dominant point of view. Rastier explains that in the duality *content/expression*, content is both known and in search of an expression, while expression is wanting to be assigned meaning. In the acts of enunciation and interpretation, their bond is always revisable. This is the critical nature of all semiosis (2012: 11).

This notion of duality is one of the keys to understanding Saussure. At one point, he even refers to it as the “law of Duality” (2006: 208). In his notes for the second Course (1908-1909), Saussure reduces language to several dualities: *signifiant/signifié*, *individual/collective*, *langue/parole*, and

²¹ My translation.

social passivity/individual will (2006: 208); to which we can add *synchrony/diachrony* and *paradigmatic/syntagmatic*. Because the sign is “already double given the internal association it bears” (i.e., *signifiant/signifié*) and “double by its existence in two systems” (i.e., *langue/parole*), it is “subject to double manipulation” (2006: 208). In this way, Saussure accounts for linguistic complexity without having to break language into separate parts. This is also where he declares: “Here for the first time it is a question of two Linguistics” (2006: 209), i.e., *langue* and *parole*.

By observing the interaction of these dualities in a given act of interpretation, the opposition *matter/mind* gives way to the opposition *simple/complex* (Rastier 2012a: 7), for the signifier and the signified are not isomorphic: a compact expression (signifier) can correspond to a diffused content (signified) and vice versa. Thus, every interpretive trajectory is complex insofar as the poles of these dualities always intervene (2012a: 7). Saussure applies this methodology to semiotics as a whole when he declares: “Semiology = morphology, grammar, syntax, synonymy, rhetoric, stylistics, lexicology, etc., *all of which are inseparable.*” (2006: 26). All of these “domains” of linguistic inquiry are in fact different points of view from which to appreciate and describe the complexity of languages²² as well as other semiotic performances.

In order to understand how the notion of passage follows this line of thinking, we will now turn to Saussure’s brief presentation of the *kenome* and the *associative seme* (Saussure 2006: 63). It is here that we find a clear understanding of the linguistic sign as a moment of interpretation instead of as an ontological entity or relation (see Figure 3).

We mistakenly believe [there to be]

- (1) a word such as *voir* for example which exists in its own right,
- (2) a meaning, which is the thing *associated* with this word.

But..., in other words it is the association itself which makes the word, and without it there is nothing.

The best proof of this is that *vuvar*, in another language, would have another meaning: is therefore nothing itself: and thus is only a *word* insofar as it evokes a meaning. *But, once this is clear, it becomes obvious that you can no longer divide things up, putting the word on one side, and its meaning on the other. The two things make a whole.*

All that one can do is to assert the existence of the *kenome* \cap and the *associative seme* \sqcup . (Saussure 2006: 63)

Figure 3. The Kenome

The *kenome* and the *associative seme* lead us to a contextual model of the sign (Rastier 2003a: 34). The graphic representation of the *kenome* does not separate signifier from signified; they form a whole (Rastier 2003a: 34 & 2005). It also suggests an onomasiological perspective: the signified opens towards undetermined signifiers. With the addition of the *associative semes*, the monadic sign is destroyed, for it represents the sign as contextually defined (Rastier 2003a: 34) and also gives it a temporal orientation. The up/down distinction gives way to a left/right opposition that brings in the preceding and following context. According to Rastier, Saussure’s use of concave forms instead of convex ones represents a negative ontology of differences that breaks away from the round forms of identity ontology of the parmenidian tradition. (2003a: 4).

Because languages depend “fundamentally on differences” and not on “positive values” (Saussure 2006: 47), Saussure rejects any ontological conception of language founded on *identity*. Rastier explains that “linguistic objects are neither identical to themselves, nor homogeneous, nor

²² From this perspective, the tripartition of semiotics and linguistics into syntax, semantics, and pragmatics and the subsequent search for “interfaces” between them seems unnecessary.

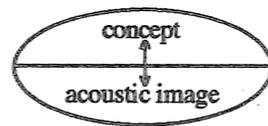
discrete, nor stable. They are taken up by continuous transformations that make each occurrence into a hapax²³ (2013: 9). Even the successive repetition of the same word is already complex because it is a dual occurrence each time (i.e., of a signifier and a signified) (Rastier 2012: 27). Because the *entire* situation and context in which a word is uttered is *never* reproducible, its meaning can never rely merely on its reference to something other than itself, nor on a typical form, but rather first and foremost on its participation in a text understood as a contextual action. So, when language loses its ontological “anchoring”, its units get their meaning, not from the world, but from and through texts (Rastier 2009b: 23)²⁴.

After Saussure first sketched out his notion of *semiology* around 1894, his works in anagrams (begun in 1906) and his study of German legends (begun in 1903) made him leave the problem of the sign for the problem of the text, both on the expression plane (anagrams) and on the content plane (motifs and symbols) (Rastier 2003a: 47). Saussure’s gradual shift of focus from the microlinguistic (phonology, signs) to macrolinguistic textual studies (anagrams, German legends), is more in line with rhetorical and hermeneutic approaches to language largely ignored by many linguists that follow the logico-grammatical tradition²⁵.

In the 19th century, it was commonplace for linguists to study myths and other texts as part of their linguistic projects. For Saussure, the study of textual units and the study of words are both part of semiology and subject to the same principles at different scales of complexity. He even compared elementary units of expression like *runes* to macrosemantic structures like a *characters*. (Rastier 2009b: 23). Because the instability of language is a result of textual creativity, the fundamental unit of language is the text, not the sign. On the one hand, an isolated sign is only a methodological decision and cannot be empirically observed (Rastier 2003). On the other hand, many textual units are not made up of signs, such as themes or narrative functions (2006: 3), and they may be the result of linguistic norms beyond the grammar (i.e., genres) as well as other social norms.

According to Rastier, Saussure can be considered as a preparatory instruction and introduction to the sciences of the text. (2009b: 14). For example, in the *CLG*, Saussure makes it clear that “in a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it” (Saussure 1983: 118), for a language is a system in which “the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others” (1983: 113). Émile Constantin’s notes from the third course (Saussure 1993: 89a) illustrate this principle of contextuality (Figure 4).

On the one hand we have this relation, already mentioned:



and on the other hand this relation

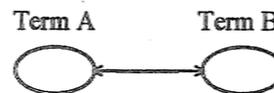


Figure 4. The principle of contextuality based on the notes of Emile Constantin (89)

²³ My translation.

²⁴ From a rhetorical/hermeneutic perspective, the exterior of a text is made up of other texts and semiotic performances. Thus, interpretation can be objectified by referring to a corpus or an intertext instead of resorting to an ontology (Rastier 2012a: 5).

²⁵ For a detailed comparison between the logico-grammatical tradition and the rhetorico-hermeneutic traditions, see Rastier 2010.

When two signs (or *kenomes*) enter into relation (via *associative semes*), they are inseparably one and never isolated. At the same time, the *signifié* and the *signifiant* of any given sign can be associated with any *signifiant* or *signifié* of another sign, as we see in Saussure’s own hand (Figure 5).

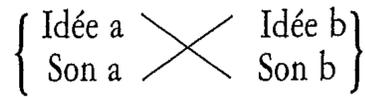


Figure 5. (Saussure 2002: 290)

This indicates that the context of a unit of expression (signifier) can be a unit of content (signified), and reciprocally.

Today, this can be “mapped out” in the form of interpretive paths as we see in the elementary enunciative and interpretive trajectories proposed by Rastier (2003a: 38) in Figure 6.

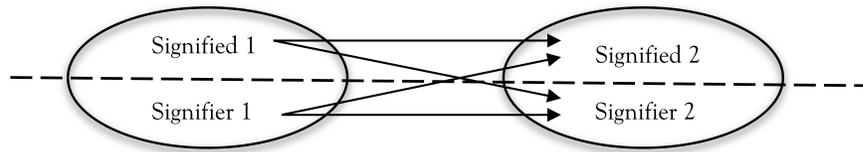


Figure 6. Elementary enunciative and interpretive trajectories

These interpretive paths also permit us to speak of heteroplanar ($Sé \leftrightarrow Sa$) and homoplanar ($Sé \leftrightarrow Sé$; $Sa \leftrightarrow Sa$) contextualizations. Because all their relations mutually condition each other, the trajectory of signifieds is inseparable from that of signifiers (Rastier 2003a: 39). However, the signifier is never the point of departure for it must be recognized first²⁶. A signifier never imposes itself in the form of *evidence* (in the logical positivist sense) or *data* because semiosis can only be fixed as the result of an interpretation. (Rastier 2012: 13). By applying the differential principle to the syntagmatic trajectory of interpretation we get a sort of “horizontal” semiosis that is textual, complex and unique; in other words, a linguistics of *parole*.

Saussure’s notion of *value* “excludes an atomistic definition of the sign” and “prohibits the compositional definition of meaning, because as a structural principle it argues that the local phenomena are determined by the global ones.” (Rastier 2002: 36). This is why we cannot identify the “building blocks” of a text without first considering the entire text and its genre. On the one hand, we cannot reduce a text to a suite of propositions because macrosemiotic forms have their own kind of structure and unfolding that may transverse – and therefore modify – any given passage within it. On the other hand, the interpretation of one text may involve other texts and/or semiotic performances (e.g., through allusions, citations, illustrations, etc.). Following through with this saussurean perspective, we can also say that the text (as a cultural object) and the practice that produces it are inseparably one, a duality, “for a text is produced by a constant activity of rewriting that guarantees its cohesion” (Rastier 2009a: 14).

By treating contextualized meaning as an inseparable oneness emerging solely from differences – or “action-values” (Bouquet 2002: 27) –, the *kenome* and the *associative semes* provide the groundwork for the current notion of the *passage*. Rastier offers the following hypothesis: since *parole* “commands” *langue*, the sign is first and foremost a *segment of parole* (2005). This point of view is clearly supported by Saussure himself when he uses the expression “sign of *parole*” and not “sign of

²⁶ Identifying signifiers may be a point of entry into a text or semiotic performance, but it is “preceded by expectations and presumptions that define the contract proper to the textual genre of the practice in progress; it also seems to be a point of return.” [My translation] (Rastier 2012: 13)

*langue*²⁷ (2002: 265). Conceiving of the “sign” in this way permits us to restore it to the text from which it came and where it is in fact reconfigured with each use (Rastier 2007: 32). Rastier therefore proposes to replace the monadic sign presented in *CLG* by reformulating the ancient notion of the *passage* as both a place in a text and a moment of interpretation that chooses and isolates it.

The *passage* is of variable breadth and enclosure and it has no fixed borders, for its scope depends on the point of view that determines its selection. It could be a word, which is already a syntagm (e.g., “anthropology”, “laughable”), or even a whole text insofar as it points toward an intertext (Rastier 2003a: 48). Because a *passage* is a purely relational and contextual unit, its relative “closure” can only be identified when relations within a passage are stronger than relations between passages (Rastier 2009a: 13). Rastier notes that this is less paradoxical than it sounds. After all this situation is common to all cultural sciences: data – *les données* (the “givens”) – are what we give ourselves, for nothing imposes them on us and we always choose them (Rastier 2003a: 36). He proposes an elementary diagram of the *passage* (Figure 7).

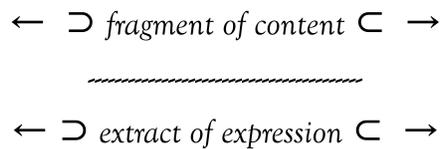


Figure 7. The passage (Rastier 2011: 62)

On the plane of expression (signifier), “the passage is an *extract* (e.g., in between two blanks, a minimal character sequence; in between two pauses or punctuation marks, a period” [Rastier 2009a: 12]). On the plane of content, “the passage is a fragment pointing at its left and right, near and distant contexts.” (Rastier 2009a: 12). The associated context can be described in terms of “correlate fragments” and “co-occurrent extracts” (Rastier 2011: 63). To account for the effects one passage may have on other passages, he proposes the terms *portée du fragment* (impact or reach of a fragment) and *incidence de l'extrait* (incidence or repercussion of an extract) (2011: 62-63). The reticular nature of the *passage* is further complexified through the distinction between *form* and *background (fond)* on both the semantic (signified) and expressive (signifier) planes²⁸. Depending on the passage, its internal structure may be compact or diffused throughout the text, while its correlates and co-occurents may be near or far from it. In an anagram, for example, a compact semantic unit can be signified in a diffused manner by disseminated phonemes, e.g., isophony (Rastier 2009b: 25).

Extracting a passage, necessarily decontextualizes it, so our task is to determine what qualifies it as “detachable” while still acknowledging its connection to the text from which it came. To address the problem of qualifying a passage as a datum, Rastier introduces a new duality, which he calls *point of view/guarantee* :

The passage comes under the general model of textual datum, defined by four posts...namely: a signifier, or the extract; a signified, or the fragment; a point of view, which rules over the description or application process; a guarantee (made possible by the setting up of the text and the constitution of the corpus) (Rastier 2009a: 13)

²⁷ The English translation by Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires says, “*the speech signs* which make up language” (Saussure 2006: 190)

²⁸ This is developed in detail in Rastier 2009a.

The duality *signified/signifier* is thus regulated by a duality at a superior level between *point of view* and *guarantee*. A *point of view* is an instance determined by a practice and an individual or collective agent. It is not simply a point of observation: for example, in data processing, it depends on the application (Rastier 2012: 28). *Guarantee* is the instance of validation that founds the evaluation of the studied unity: this instance is a social norm that can be juridical, scientific, religious or simply *endoxale*. In corpus linguistics, the guarantor is the authority that presided over the constitution of the corpus (2012: 28) This englobing duality calls upon the philological, rhetorical, and hermeneutic traditions: from hermeneutics, we have the concern with questions of legitimacy (*guarantee*); from rhetoric, we have the question of *ethos* which involves both poles; in philology, the *point of view* relates to the signature and the *guarantee* is about authentication (2012: 28). In short, the point of view determines the object (i.e., semiosis) and the guarantee legitimizes it (Rastier 2014: 36).

Because Hjelmslev's terms *expression* and *content* can lead to confusion (i.e., *content* implies that something is "contained", while *expression* could imply that something pre-existed it's expression [Rastier 2003a: 49]), Rastier proposes the terms *value* (instead of *signified* or *content*) and *phore* (instead of *signifier* or *expression*), as we see in his elementary model of the cultural object (2011: 54), in Figure 8.

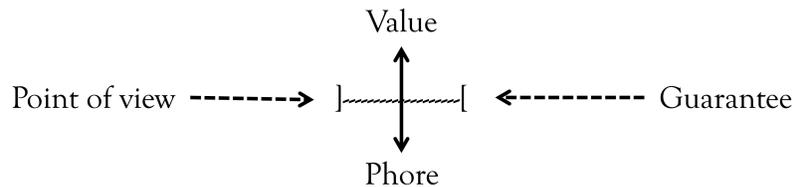


Figure 8. The Elementary Semiotic model of the Cultural Object

While *phore* and *value* constitute *semiosis*, *point of view* and *guarantee* constitute *ethesis* (Rastier 2010: 18). In this way, we can define the border between *internal linguistics*, in the relations between the two planes of language (*semiosis*), and *external linguistics*, in the agreement between the point of view and the guarantee (*ethesis*). Rastier uses Saussure's *CLG* to illustrate the notions of *point of view* and *guarantee*: the *CLG* reflects the point of view of its editors Bally et Séchehaye and, on several decisive points, it opposes the point of view assumed by Saussure in his published and unpublished writings. At the same time, the diffusion and notoriety of this work among linguists gives it a certain guarantee. The result is a precarious and questionable solidarity between the point of view and the guarantee. (2012: 31).

A good example of how passages are identified, combined and transformed can be found in what Justin Wishne and Bryan Nicolas call "the most versatile joke on earth" (2011: iii) in which the expression "That's what she said" is used "to inject sexual innuendo into otherwise innocent, everyday conversations" (xii). For example, a person trying to fit a large object into a small bag says, "I can't fit it in, it's too big". Someone else follows by saying, "That's what she said" (TWSS). Here are three more examples:

- (a) My girlfriend was on her way to pick me up and my sweatshirt was damp, so my mom gestured to the dryer and said, "Stick it in and keep it in 'til she comes!" TWSS. (Wishne & Nichols 2011: 92)
- (b) I did a PowerPoint presentation and a couple of days later I got my grade back. As my teacher handed it to me, she said, "Everything was great, but your oral presentation didn't satisfy me enough." TWSS. (2011: p. 21)
- (c) Today, during a trombone feature, our band director told the trombone section, "More! Keep giving me more until I beg you to stop!" TWSS. (2011: 19)

The addition of "TWSS" re-orientes the interpretation of the previous text as though it were something that a woman said during sexual activity, thereby actualizing a /sexual/ isotopy that re-

organizes the semantic structure (e.g., in [a], “comes” becomes an orgasm; in [b], “oral presentation” becomes ‘oral sex’; etc.). In example (c), the segment of text on the left (“Keep giving me more until I beg you to stop!”) is already part of a passage about another activity (i.e., directing a trombone section), but the addition of “TWSS” isolates it and integrates it into a new passage. The passage on the right retroactively re-directs the interpretation of the passage on the left giving rise to a new passage. This transformation involves *metatopy* (a change of semantic background, e.g., /musical activity/ -->/sexual activity) and *metamorphism* (a change in semantic form, e.g., “sticking a sweatshirt in the dryer” --> “sexual penetration”). When we have a change in the relations between form and background, it is called *transposition* (Rastier 2007: 45-46).

As a transposable *topos*, “TWSS” acquires a certain autonomy, much like a proverb or saying, yet it is never the same, for it always integrates itself inseparably into the passage that precedes it, resulting in a unique construction. In that moment, the relations within this new passage become “stronger” than those that connect it to context on the left or right. It would be a mistake to think that one could explain this kind of humor by identifying pre-existing “signs” or “meanings”, for it is always to be constructed. Furthermore, grammatical rules alone cannot account for their construction because it also involves other social norms, i.e., the norms of this joke as a social practice and a genre. These norms serve as conditions, constraints, and licenses that determine how we can construct these passages, and thereby give us a set of expectations and even anticipations that also participate in their construction (i.e., *semiosis*). Familiarity with this social practice will predispose us toward a sexual interpretation, while someone unfamiliar with it might be taken aback or confused (at first). In other words, the *point of view* constructs the sexual theme while the *guarantee* legitimizes it. It is also in this relation of *ethesis* that the practice of this joke also becomes an ethical question. Teenage boys, for example, will most likely generate a different guarantee than adult women.

As a unit of meaning, the *passage* is both open to and inseparably one with its immediate linguistic context and the social practice that articulates it. At no time however can we say that a passage or its meaning pre-exists its construction. Its full understanding relies entirely on a situated interpretative action. Replacing the sign model with the *passage* leads us to a praxeology and allows us to see how zones of local, stabilized meaning result from the global context (Rastier 2014: 121). Because it is concerned with values constructed through differences, it helps us understand the localized and creative character of all activities of knowing (Rastier 2001: 344). Overall, the *passage* is better equipped than the monadic *sign* for describing complexities of linguistic interpretation as well as the qualitative inequalities that result from each interpretation, for the meaning of a passage changes every time it is (re)constructed.

The *passage* also promises better results because it does not postulate the identity of units in and of themselves while still admitting discrete units or even absent units by contrasting sections or texts belonging to the same corpus (Rastier 2013: 19). Just as a word is only understood in contrast to its neighbors both paradigmatically and syntagmatically, a text is also understood in comparison to other texts of the same genre (Rastier 2014: 55). Because a text is a cultural object that interacts with other texts and non-linguistic semiotic performances, an entire text can also be treated as a semiotic passage, whether in a social practice, a corpus or an intertext. In this way, the notion of *passage* lends itself well to the comparative and differential methods of the cultural sciences in general. As Rastier explains, these are sciences of values, not facts; of conditions, not causes; of individuals, not universals; of processes, not beings; of occurrences, not types; of praxeologies, not ontologies (Rastier 2012a: 8). From this point of view, cultures can only be defined by comparison to other cultures, through their differences as well as through their interaction. Perhaps we should qualify cultures as *passages* too.

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