_____

Linguistic Arbitrariness and the 'Nebulous' World of *Vorstellung* in Saussure.

Horst Ruthrof
Murdoch University
H.Ruthrof@murdoch.edu.au

Introduction

Linguists who believe that they have resolved the problems identified in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique général* (2005; [1916]) and philosophers who think that Saussure is irrelevant to the concerns of the philosophy of language are both mistaken. Reading Saussure's foundational linguistics from the perspective of a broadly conceived philosophy of language means in the first instance to address some of the most basic principles involved in the study of natural language. The fact that this text was compiled posthumously from Saussure's notes is hardly an obstacle to such an undertaking since none of his surviving manuscripts contradicts those leading principles. (Saussure 1997; Godel 1954; 1958-9; Bouquet and Engler 2002; Engler 2004). In particular, the point that Saussure had to distance himself from historical linguistics in order to pursue the core characteristics of language in general remains beyond doubt. (e.g. Bouquet and Engler 2004, Introduction) Certainly, the *Cours* as it has come down to us clearly reflects three important steps in Saussure's thinking as documented in his public lectures: language as system instantiated in the mind (1907); the notion of the linguistic sign as part of *semiologie* (1908-9); and the internal mechanism of the linguistic sign (1910-11). (Komatsu and Wolf 1996; Komatsu and Wolf 1997; Komatsu and Harris 1993). Nevertheless, the question where to allocate Saussure in the *philosophical* scheme of things is not at all easy. He cannot be readily aligned with the 'linguistic pragmatists' (the late Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, Dummett, Davidson), nor with model-theoretical Platonists (Frege, Russell, Carnap, Tarksi). (Brandom 2000: 7) Historically, the Saussurean projects stands very much on its own. At its heart we find, among other seminal insights, the bare bones of a *theory of meaning*, crystallised in his definition of the linguistic sign as an arbitrary relation between the publically available lexicon of a natural language on the one hand and, on the other, the *Vorstellungen* which we typically entertain in the process of *understanding*. In this paper I will substitute the term *Vorstellung* for Saussure's two terms *idée* (e.g., 33, 47, 104, 144, 155, 166) and *concept* (e.g., 28f., 31, 98f., 144f., 158f.) on the grounds that in the *Cours* they are deployed indiscriminately and that *Vorstellung* defined as 'mental transformation of perception' seems to me to capture best the text's 'intention'. Saussure places the relation between linguistic expression (word, phrase, sentence) and *Vorstellung* (*idée; concept*) within a general '*sémiologie*', a theory of signs in which language occupies a special niche. From this perspective, language can be compared with

_____

nonverbal systems at the level of the *sign* viewed as a combination of a *signifiant*, or *signifier,* and a *signifié*, or *signified*. For natural language, this *semiological* unity Saussure calls the 'linguistic sign', characterised as an 'arbitrary' combination of its components. It is this definition that forms the focus of the present paper. If it turns out that Saussure is correct in his assumption that both *signifier* and *signified* are indeed *arbitrary* or *unmotivated*, then his conclusion that the linguistic sign as a whole must be arbitrary goes through. If, however, it can be demonstrated that one of the two components of the linguistic sign is *motivated*, then his thesis of arbitrariness collapses. I will argue that Saussure's assumptions of the chaotic nature of *idée, concept* or *Vorstellung* and the resulting arbitrariness of the *signified* are mistaken and, as a result, the linguistic sign is in need of re-definition.

1. Saussurean arbitrariness

1.1 The linguistic sign

At the centre of Saussure's systemic conception of language as *langue*, distinguished from *langage* as language in action and *parole* as individual speech event, we find his definition of the linguistic sign, which differs markedly from the theorisation of language in the Fregean tradition. Unlike Frege, Saussure does not allocate the notion of the sign to linguistic expressions. Rather, the linguistic sign is made up of two components, a sound image (*l'image acoustique*) and a *Vorstellung* (*concept, idée*). Only when these two components come together has a linguistic sign been realised. As Saussure insists, «une suite de sons n'est linguistique que si elle est le support d'une idée» (Saussure 2005: 144). At the same time and as a result of the incorporation of this *Vorstellung* within the linguistic sign, *l'idée* now reappears as a «qualité de la substance phonetique» (144f.) These two elements must however not be confused with a name and a thing. (98) They are both part of a mental process, an «association psychique» (28) together constituting «une entité psychique». (99) That is, the linguistic sign is instantiated in the mind. Saussure conceives of this process as a «circuit». (31) Once this circuit is completed the linguistic sign is severed from the origins of one its components, the «faits de conscience» (28), «idées» (33, 47, 144, 155, 166), «concepts» (28f., 31, 98f., 144f., 158f.) or *Vorstellungen,* understood here as mental transformations of perception. In the *Cours* this independence of the linguistic sign from the origins of and in *Vorstellung* is summed up in the conviction that natural language, viewed as *langue* and just like its formal cousins, «est une forme et non une substance». (169; 157). Yet, the linguistic relation between sound image and *Vorstellung* turns out to be only a special case within a much broader theoretical frame, Saussure's *sémiologie,* a general theory of signs in which language occupies centre stage. «On peut donc concevoir une science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale». (33) Since the study of language, Saussure predicts, is a branch of such a new science, the laws which semiology is going to discover will apply to language. In anticipation of such laws, then, Saussure formulates the principles which govern the specifics of the linguistic sign by generalising its two components. The sound image is covered by the notion of the *signifier* (*signifiant*), the *Vorstellung* by that of the *signified* (*signifié*). (97ff.) It would appear that by invoking *Vorstellung* (*idée, concept*) as the content of the *signified* and so as an essential component of the linguistic sign Saussure revived an already discredited Lockean notion. (Locke 1993: 45-289) After all, Frege had eliminated *Vorstellung* from his description of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* in 1892 on the grounds that its subjective

_____

ingredients disqualified it from playing a role in any logical account of natural language semantics. (Frege 1970) And could one not argue that since Saussure's central aim was to put the study of language on a proper scientific footing he undermined his own goal by giving mental processes such prominence in his theory? There is a deep rift in the theorisation of language between approaches shunning psychological questions and a resurgence of theories in which mental processes once more play an indispensable role. On the one hand we have truth-conditional theories of a Fregean persuasion (Wiggins 1992) or truth-conditional arguments in the wake of Tarski's 'Convention-T' (Davidson 2004) and the tradition of meaning scepticism best represented by the description of meaning as use'; (Wittgenstein 2005) on the other hand there is a burgeoning literature insisting that without consideration of mental facts we can capture only part of what is going on in language. (Hurford 2007; Jackendoff 2002; Corballis 2002; Johnson and Lakoff 1999; Gallese and Lakoff 2005; Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Ruthrof 1997; 2000; 2010) Given this situation as well as recent scientific evidence, the Lockean account looks ripe for some kind of rehabilitation. Suffice it to say here that the philosophy of language is not in a strong position today to discredit Saussure's psychological emphasis. Nor are the real problems of the Saussurean account to be sought in his description of the linguistic sign as mentally instantiated. Saussure's flaws lie elsewhere. What does require careful scrutiny is the widely accepted idea of the radical arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

1.2 Radical arbitrariness

Le lien unissant le significant au signifié est arbitraire, ou encore, puisque nous entendons par signe le total resultant de l'association d'signifiant à un singifié, nous pouvons dire plus simplement: le signe linguistique est arbitraire (100).

Such is the stark claim of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, an assertion so readily accepted both in linguistics and the philosophy of language that Saussure could confidently write «le principe de l'arbitraire du signe n'est contesté par personne». (100) Saussure's contention is radical in the sense that we are dealing here with four different kinds of arbitrariness: (1) of the signifier; (2) the signified; (3) the bond between signifier and signified; and (4) the sign as a whole. It is the central concern of this paper to reflect on this popular proposition. But first we must deal with a number of consession made by Saussure, none of which however undermines his core assertion. There is reference to onomatopoeia which, on closer scrutiny, does not however seriously weaken the notion of arbitrariness since the mimetic sounds in diverse languages differ significantly from one another. (101f.) There is the concession that «le signe peut être relativement motive», (181) but only diachronically so. Saussure allows for different kinds of motivation of the linguistic sign to the point where he admits that «il n'existe pas de langue où rien ne soit motive» but at the same time «quant à en concevoir une où tout le serait, ce la serait impossible par definition». (183). This, however, only affects changes within language and not the principles of the linguistic sign itself. An exception appears to be Saussure's remark on Chinese, which he describes as 'ultra-lexicological' and so relatively highly motivated. (183) Yet even here Saussure leaves no doubt as to the soundness of the principle of arbitrariness. He does so because of his commitment to the idea that both components which make up the linguistic sign, the sound image of the *signifier* and the *Vorstellung* or *signified,* are arbitrary. To be sure, if Saussure is

_____

right in this assumption, his arbitrariness thesis is unassailable. On the other hand, should one of the components of the linguistic sign prove to be motivated, his thesis would rest on a *pars pro toto* fallacy.

1.3 The nebulous world of Vorstellung in Saussure

A commitment crucial for Saussure's radical arbitrariness is his belief that «notre pensée n'est qu'une masse amorphe et indistinct». Without language, we could not distinguish two *Vorstellungen* (*idées*) clearly and consistently. In fact, on its own, our thinking is nothing but a nebulous cloud, «une nébuleuse», in which nothing is delimited of necessity. (155) This passage, while uncontroversial at the beginning of the twentieth century when evolutionary biology had scarcely become a respectable science, stands in sharp contrast to what we are now learning about our animal relatives and the lives of hominids several millions of years prior to the invention of language. Tigers, known for their precision hunting, could not have survived if they lived in Saussure's «royaume flottant»; nor could our pre-linguistic forebears, who for millennia produced precision instruments out of carefully selected materials. What is not in dispute here is the weaker thesis that language constitutes a significant refinement of nonverbal distinctions, a point to be taken up later. Given Saussure's conviction that our thought processes are chaotic by nature unless they are organised by language and his endeavour to challenge historical linguistics by a synchronic, scientifically generalised approach, it is not surprising that he debunked the study of the evolution of language. (156). The question of the origin of language, says Saussure, should not be posed at all (105). After all, in the study of language there is nothing to be found that looks like natural data (116). But it is one thing to say that language is a refinement of *Vorstellungen* in the sense that it transforms raw *Vorstellungen* into a series of fine-grain linguistic concepts and quite another to say that without language everything is nebulous. (cfr. 26) There is now a growing body of studies aiming to tone down or even reverse the Saussurean position on this matter (Bickerton 1981; 1990; 1995; Jackendoff 2002; Hurford 2007). While the jury is still out on what precisely we mean by linguistic refinement, it looks as if Saussure's strong assumption of the vagueness of *Vorstellungen* may be no more than a prejudice. Another objection to Saussure's foggy world of *Vorstellung* can be raised from measurements of the human ability to make thousands of olfactory distinctions in the face of the stark poverty of olfactory differentiations in the lexica of our natural languages (Ackerman 1991). Not everything we can clearly distinguish is equally differentiated by language, which is precisely the obverse of Saussure's claim. Now the boot is on the other foot; it is language that is vague rather than perception and its mental derivative, *Vorstellung*.

2. Verbal and Nonverbal Semiosis

2.1 The systemic character of Vorstellung

When a new term is created in the world of techno-logos, such as 'buzzer', or in the class-room, such as 'rank', or in the ghetto, such as 'dude', what comes first, language or a new experience in need of a linguistic expression? Once the new lexicon is in place both appear to come as a package. Speech communities introduce

_____

neologisms to express new nuances of experience and we grasp their conceptualisation when we hear or read the novel term. We are socialized into meaning as use. Barring the red herring of onomatopoeia, the terms chosen by culture in such situations are indeed arbitrary in Saussure's sense. But are the *Vorstellungen* coded by the new terms equally arbitrary? And more specifically, are they not only arbitrary but also 'chaotic' with respect to our *Wahrnehmungswelt* and its imaginative variation, our *Vorstellungswelt?* If we were to agree with Saussure's assumption of the murkiness of *pensée* on its own, this would have serious consequences for our conception of biology and in particular of perception. One consequence would be that we would have to agree that whatever systematicity there is in human perception would have to be derived from language. Furthermore, if we accept that *Vorstellung* is neurally tied to perception, as cognitive science has assured us for some time that it is, then *Vorstellung* likewise would be systemic only as a result of linguistic relations. As such, Saussure's arbitrariness thesis puts him in irreconcilable conflict with even the most modest form of naturalism, as with the uncontroversial assertion by Kant that the unity of consciousness is a precondition of all data of *Anschauungen*, an important implication of which is a necessary systematicity of perception that is logically prior also to language. (A107). Another angle from which we can view Saussure's nebulous world of nonverbal *idées* is the philosophy of language from Frege to the present where the notion of truth asserted by way of recourse to perception has played a major role. From Frege's link between the truth values of true/false and the notion of meaning to Moritz Schlick's verification procedure and the truth-conditional arguments mounted by Donald Davidson, there is the fundamental assumption that perception itself is a consistently reliable measure by which to judge the sentences of natural language. While I strongly oppose making truth-oriented arguments the basis of a natural language semantics, because they can at best produce no more than a partial theory, I accept that truth and language relations can be informative language games. An intriguing game of this sort is played by Hilary Putnam who compares language to a balloon. In short he writes, «it seems as if language is like a great balloon, anchored to the ground of non-linguistic fact only by a number of widely scattered and very thin (but all-important) ropes» (Putnam 1979: 4f.). A Saussurean might object that Putnam's facts are contaminated in the sense that their observation is always already linguistically differentiated. On the other hand, this is the kind of argument that reveals the vicious circularity not only of truth-oriented theories of language but equally of the Saussurean linguistic picture itself: nothing, not even reference, can escape the formal orbit of the Saussurean linguistic sign and so the idealised circularity of *langue* as a whole. Yet it is not enough to reject the Saussurean account on the grounds that it «omits reference». (Devitt and Sterelny 1990: 213) In structural linguistics reference is still present, albeit as an internalised relation amongst linguistic signs. What requires emphasis is the absence of independent nonverbal phenomena. In Saussure's closed-circuit verbal world there are no such things as Putnam's non-linguistic facts. Before and outside of language, gravity is no more than a 'nébuleuse'. But having named it for example *diqiu yinli* (earth globe pulling force) the mist has lifted. Philosophical critique of Saussure's fog of *Vorstellung* also finds support in recent evolutionary biology. If it is the case that human *intrinsic intentionality* is the result of a very long evolutionary history of the cellular division of labour, the question of the systematicity of perception and its modifications in *Vorstellung* can be laid to rest for good. Cells responsible for perceptual input are said to have been increasingly matched, from amoebae to

_____

humans, by cells monitoring such input for the benefit of the survival of the organism, to the point where the monitoring capacity of neurons far outstrips the input capacity of cells responsible for perception. This scientific narrative provides a strong case for the view that both perception and its variants in *Vorstellung* were systemically tied to the objectivities of the world long before language was invented. (Fitch 2008). One tentative yet important conclusion we can draw from all of this is that it is very likely that *Vorstellung* is by no means random or arbitrary, but rather a systemic reworking of perception. If this is so, and there is no evidence to my mind to suggest otherwise, then we must review the Saussurean order. Instead of saying that both *signifiers* and the *Vorstellungen* we associate with them are arbitrary, we should say that while *verbal signifiers* are arbitrary, *Vorstellungen* and therefore *signifieds* are not. And if the thesis goes through that the latter are systemically related to perception as transformations, then the Saussurean relation must be reversed. It is not language that orders *Vorstellungen*, at least not in the first instance. The opposite appears to be the case. Perception and *Vorstellung* impose order on the arbitrary *signifiers* of language. In other words, while *Vorstellung* is both motivated and systemic, language now turns out to be fundamentally characterised by *derivative systematicity* or *derived motivation.* Having said this, there is of course a sense in which language calls the shots, as it were. Much of our institutional world appears to be created by language rather than by perception and its mental variants, a perspective sympathetic to Wittgenstein's vista of language as «refinement» (Wittgenstein 1976: 3).

2.2 Language as 'refinement'

What we have described here speculatively is of course only part of the story, though it remains a foundational relation between words and *Vorstellung*. As language evolved, it increasingly sharpened nonverbal distinctions. So much so that significant portions of our lexica and grammars would appear to support the priority Saussure grants the verbal. In this sense, language, in large measure, can be regarded as the *refinement* of perception and *Vorstellung*. However far from conceding that the *derivative systematicity* or *derived motivation* of language is a thing of the distant past, it should be regarded as the continuing rock bottom of verbal signification. This I take to be the gist of Putnam's metaphor of the balloon of language tied forever, even if only sporadically noticeable, to the ground of our *Wahrnehmungswelt*. One might add to Putnam's observation that though perception provides the main stays that prevent the balloon from drifting, it is *Vorstellung* in *schematised* form that provides language with meaning every step of the way. So we could modify Putnam by adding to his «widely scattered and very thin (but all-important) ropes» something like «and millions of fine threads tying language to *Vorstellung*». (Putnam 1979: 4f.). This, I suggest, is reflected not only in the lexicon of natural languages, but also in their grammatical structures. As to the lexicon, changing community feelings of justice, for example, are reflected in, as much as they are created by, a forever more specific legal vocabulary. The rights of individuals in general are specified to distinguish the rights of gays, lesbians, mothers, children, and the unborn. All forms of the splitting of concepts constitute refinements produced by language. But such refinement is not restricted to the lexicon; in a certain sense it applies also to grammar. I think that Derek Bickerton is wrong in his emphasis on the revolutionary moment when language as we know it was born as a result of the invention of syntax.

_____

(Bickerton 1987; 1990) I suggest on the contrary that syntax in its elaborate forms, such as conditional structures, evolved on top of a *perceptual protosyntax* which *structurally* reflected the way the world was realised by hominids. For it is most likely that after millennia of perceptual and gestural pre-linguistic existence, language would have inherited and then refined such relations and their modifications in *Vorstellung*, which had served our ancestor so well for so long. There is no logical barrier to thinking that thought sequences like 'if, then' or 'only if x, then y' were not already available in perceptual reasoning. If language can indeed be regarded as a refinement of perceptual and gestural being, then Saussure's radical dissociation of the iconicity of pre-linguistic grasp from the linguistic *signified* looks must unlikely. But what precisely is being refined here? We could say that language specifies primitive, perceptual concepts, which we share with non-languaging animals, by an ongoing series of conceptual subdivisions of resemblance relations, or *iconicity.* This rests on the definitional assumption that concepts are best described as mental regulatory social mechanisms delimiting iconicity generated by the senses and its neural transformations. In the visual domain, this process can be readily demonstrated. On the other hand, as the verbal gyrations on wine labels testify, in the domain of olfactory and gustatory representations language is hardly a match for the nuances we are able to register. From this basis one could attempt a neural rehabilitation of Kant's definition of the concept as «a rule of the synthesis of perception» (KrV A722/B750) and a «predicate of possible judgment», (KrV A69/B94) while at the same time avoid the unbridgeable chasm that separates Saussure's linguistic sign from whatever came before. Speculative as such thought must remain, it finds summary support in Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark «Language – I want to say –is a refinement, *im Anfang war die Tat*» (Wittgenstein 1976: 3).

2.3 Why language is not an interpreted formal sign system

Given Saussure's conviction that language is all form with no substance (2005:157; 169), one might expect that structuralist linguists share the view of language as an «interpreted formal sign system» (Grewendorf *et al.*1987: 377). Saussure's radical arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and his readiness to see the game of chess as an «artificial realisation» of natural language suggest that this is so, except for the all-important qualification that he would not admit an outside to which language could be applied. (Saussure 2005: 125; 43; 153) After all, there is nothing distinct outside the Saussurean linguistic domain. But whether argued from a realist or a Saussurean idealist perspective, the very idea that language can be at all equated with formal sign systems rests on a simple confusion of *a priori* and *a posteriori* relations. Employing an inch tape to check the length of a table can be called an application of a formal system to a portion of the phenomenal world. The tape can be regarded as formal in the sense that its subdivisions are definitionally controlled and so can be translated into another similar formal system, such as a metric tape. So it is tempting to think that language works like such tapes in that we apply strings of verbal *signifiers* to nonverbal phenomena. This would indeed be so if natural languages were first designed as systems coherent in themselves and definitionally secured in the way our measuring tapes are. In short, the essential characteristic here is the *a priori* constitution of an axiomatically determined and definitionally secured sign system and its practice. But not even an artificial language such as Esperanto satisfies this formal rule. It was construed in alignment with a number of existing European

_____

languages and so reflects their systemic nature inherited from perceptual realities and their cultural material and mental variants. Natural language has grown in relation to and as an economising reflection of our socio-perceptual world and its modifications in *Vorstellung*. As such, language takes the relation between its arbitrarily chosen *signifiers* not from a formal system of axioms, definitions and syntactic rules, but from the *translation* of nonverbal realisations of materials, events, and feelings. Language is therefore an *a posteriori* constituted sign system. First comes speech as social practice, and then comes its systemic formulation in lexicons and grammar books. This difference is driven home when we apply the formal notion of *recursivity*, an exercise which sooner or later runs into the wall of idiomatic expressions. Clearly, Saussure's *langue* is no more than yet another *a posteriori* construction on top of language, an abstractive, derivative system of explanation rather than an axiomatic foundation. An all-important consequence of this is that the structure of formal systems does not *reflect* a non-linguistic order but merely measures it according to its own terms, while natural language not only measures but also, in its very make-up, *mirrors* a human perceptual order. This order can be expressed as an intersemiotic integration of a multi-modal, nonverbal set of heterogeneous signs, such as olfactory, tactile, gustatory, gravitational, aural, emotional, visual and other readings of the world, a point to be resumed a little later. At a yet more primitive level this interpretive integration performed by the human organism draws fundamentally on physico-chemical and bio-chemical processes, including those of our own physiognomy. In this sense, all natural languages are deeply *motivated*, their signs anything but *arbitrary*. To opt for a chaotic and foggy world of perception and its infinite variations in *Vorstellung* in order to be able argue the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign goes against the grain of the basic principles of even the most modest kinds of naturalism. Language, it would seem, has inherited its base motivation from *perception* and its mental variants in *Vorstellung*. And yet, this kind of motivation cannot be aligned with a simple correspondence between language and world. The main reason why Alfred Tarski warned his fellow logicians in 1936 not to apply Convention-T to natural language was that its terms are anything but formal. (Tarski 1956: 267; [1936]) Yet there is a further complication. The very description of natural language highlights a problem of philosophical inquiry: the shakiness of the correspondence theory of truth. 'P' iff 'p' suffers from the need to express nonverbal phenomena by verbal signs. A hard-headed semiotician, for instance, could not in good conscience allow the unjustified translation between heterosemiotic systems to go unchallenged. Nor are we dealing here with only two systems, that of predication on the one hand and the phenomenal world on the other. The phenomenal world itself is the result of the intersemiotic unification of a number of heterosemiotic systems, the combined result of interpretations of radiation, molecular states, and other physical and bio-chemical inputs. This makes correspondence theories of truth look dubious. In a way, then, Saussure and his philosophical colleagues are committing similar errors. While the former are insensitive to the fact that their comparison rests on the untheorised transformation of non-linguistic facts into language, the latter has made a virtue of this equivocation. In natural language, a culture has chosen a verbal *signifier*, say 'tree', which evokes a *generalised* and *schematised Vorstellung* of a tree, derived from perceptual inputs and their mental transformations under social control. The fact that we can translate 'tree' by the terms 'shu' or 'arbre' or 'Baum' is often taken as the result of the self-evident possibility of relating different languages to one another as comparable systems. Yet this is not the way it works. Rather, we can

_____

translate between Chinese and French strings of verbal *signifiers* because we share a basic *tertium comparationis*: our compatible, even if culturally differentiated, nonverbal worlds of perception and *Vorstellung*. Put more simply, we are able to produce translations because we have the same kind of bodies and so generate comparable worlds by means and out of more or less the same stuff. Importantly, even this common baseline is primarily realised by way of nonverbal, iconic signs.

2.4 Enter the nonverbal

One of the crucial differences between the *semiotics* of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure's *sémiologie* is their scope. Peirce embraces everything that is an object of interpretation. Accordingly, Peirce's sign is «something that stands for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign ….» (*CP* 2.228; [1897]) This means that whatever we feel we need to decipher so allocate a place in our perceptual and conceptual world, is part of human semiosis. In contrast, Saussure's *sémiologie* is restricted to social, conventional signs, such as symbolic rites, military signals, sign language, (33) pantomime, scales as a symbol of justice and forms of greeting. (100f.) So the common practice of referring to both theories as *semiotics* is misleading; it wipes out a significant distinction. I have elsewhere marked this difference by distinguishing ROSS, or read-only sign system, from COSS, or communicative sign system. (Ruthrof 1997: 37) Nor is it self-evident why Saussure would restrict his *sémiologie* to COSS, since the interpretation of natural phenomena, such as thunder or the scent of flowers, is likewise a social activity and so well within the purview of his domain of «la vie sociale». (33). Another notable difference between the philosophical *semiotics* of Peirce and Saussurean *sémiologie* is that in the former language is one among a vast number of significatory practices, while in the latter one cannot quite avoid the impression of a kind of *linguistic imperialism*. At the very least, there is a tension in the *Cours* between *sémiologie* as a meta-science in which all nonverbal communicative signs, including linguistic ones, are ordered and explicated «par les lois de cette science» (35) and one of its members, language, which will act as its «patron general». (101) This tension has had methodological consequences, as fostering research questions such as 'What kind of language is cinema?' While this is not quite as absurd as asking «What kind of carrot is a potato?» it has led to an entire industry of film criticism discovering Saussurean linguistic relations in visual semiosis. (cf. Metz 1971). Both these differences have a strong bearing on the topic of Saussure as a philosopher of language. For his constraints on the range of *sémiologie* eliminate the most important source of one of the components of the linguistic sign as a candidate of investigation: *idée, concept,* or *Vorstellung*. In contrast, the Peircean approach allows for olfactory, gustatory, kinetic, thermal, gravitational, aural, tactile, and visual readings as heterosemiotic processes by which we, as well as pre-linguistic beings, read the nonverbal world. Furthermore, we have already established the non-congruence of verbal and nonverbal distinctions of which humans are capable and so are in a position to extend the nonverbal scenario to social practice. At the heart of such a post-Peircean picture is the emphasis on *resemblance relations* or *iconicity* by which we find our way about in the world. (*CP* 1.158) If this is so, then the alleged arbitrariness of the linguistic sign proves an unmanageable hurdle to the theorisation of the relation between nonverbal readings of the world and language. There is no

_____

room in this essay to expound this relation. Suffice it here to sum up the argument by saying that if it can be shown that iconic relations play a significant role in the linguistic sign by constituting the signified, then language must be declared to be *parasitic on nonverbal signs*. (Ruthrof 1997; 2000; 2010)

Conclusion

If nonverbal signs are motivated and if language cannot function without nonverbal semiosis, then the linguistic sign cannot be arbitrary in the way Saussure has proposed. The radical arbitrariness of structural linguistics fails. From the perspective of the philosophy of language, this failure is the result of a linguistic anti-realism denying the existence of nonverbal facts by the very definition of the linguistic sign. The paper has tried to demonstrate that those extra-linguistic facts can and must be retrieved via nonverbal semiosis. Thus, perception and *Vorstellung* re-enter the picture, not as nebulous clouds but rather as a systemically coherent world into which language gears. What separates Saussure's project most radically from the mainstream of the philosophy of language, then, is that his definition of the linguistic sign lets go of Putnam's 'ropes'. Freed from its anchor of systemic perception and its transformations in *Vorstellung*, the Saussurean linguistic sign takes on a life of its own as an arbitrary relation subsuming and emptying out all nonverbal phenomena in its idealist circularity. As a consequence, the Saussurean scenario disallows any of the traditional correspondence moves which we find in the philosophy of language, such as referential, verificationist, or truth-conditional arguments. Neither can Saussurean linguistics accommodate cognitive investigations committed to a neurally motivated explanation of perception, *Vorstellung* and language, nor is the Saussurean project compatible with Peircean semiotics in which *iconicity*, or resemblance relations, ties language to the world. According to Saussure, what systematicity we do find in language can only be of its own making. In light of the theoretical obstacles to Saussure's rudimentary theory of meaning and the scientific evidence available to us now, we should abandon his radical arbitrariness thesis of the linguistic sign and replace it by something like the following redefinition, with all the consequences this change entails for the description of meaning: the linguistic sign is a *hybrid* unity made up of an *arbitrary signifier* and a *motivated signified*. This allows for natural language to straddle the domains of formal and fully iconic sign systems without being identifiable with either.

References

ACKERMAN, Diane (1991), *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York, Vintage Books.
BICKERTON, Derek (1981), *Roots of Language*. Ann Arbor, Karoma.
BICKERTON, Derek (1987), «The Supremacy of Syntax» in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 10, 658-59.
BICKERTON, Derek (1990), *Language and Species*. Chicago, University of Chicago
Press.
BICKERTON, Derek (1995), *Language and Human Behaviour*. Seattle, University of

_____

Washington Press.

BOUQUET, Simon and ENGLER, Rudolf (2002), *Ècrits de linguistique général*. Paris, Gallimand.

BRANDOM, Robert B. (2000), *Articulating Reasons: Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

CORBALLIS, Michael (2002), *From Hand to Mouth: The Origins of Language*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

DAVIDSON, Donald (2004) «Truth and Meaning» in S.Davis and B.S.Gillon (2004) *Semantics: A Reader,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 222-233.

de SAUSSURE, Ferdinand (2005) *Cours de linguistique général*. Publié par Charles Bally et Albert Séchehaye avec la collaboration de Albert Riedlinger. Èdition critique préparée par Tullio de Auro. Paris: Payot. [all references to this edition].

de SAUSSURE, Ferdinand (1997) *Linguistik und Semiologie. Notizen aus dem Nachlass. Texte, Briefe und Dokumentation.* Ed. Johannes Fehr. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

ENGLER, RUDOLF (2004) «The Making of the *Cours de linguistique general*» in Carol Sanders (2004), *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 47-58.

FAUCONNIER, Gilles and TURNER, Mark (2002) *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York, Basic Books.

FITCH, Tecumseh (2008) «Nano-Intentionality: A Defense of Intrinsic Intentionality», in *BioPhilos* 23, 157-177.

FREGE, Gottlob (1970) «On Sense and Reference» in GEACH, Peter and BLACK, Max, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege,* Oxford, Basil Blackwell, pp. 56-78.

GALLESE, Victor and LAKOFF, George (2005), «The Brain's Concepts: The Role of the Sensory-motor System in Reason and Language», in *Cognitive Neuropsychology* 22, pp. 455-479.

GODEL, Robert (1954), «Notes inédites de F. de Saussure», in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 12, pp. 49-71.

GODEL, Robert (1958-1959), «Nouveaux documents saussuriens»*,* in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* 16, pp. 23-32.

GREWENDORF, GÜNTHER, HAMM, FRITZ and STERNEFELD,Wolfgang (1987), *Sprachliches Wissen: Eine Einführung in moderne Theorien der grammatischen Beschreibung*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

HURFORD, J.R. (2007), *The Origins of Meaning*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

JACKENDOFF, Ray (2002), *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

JOHNSON, Mark and LAKOFF, George (1999), *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York, Basic Books.

KANT, Immanuel (1956) *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Hamburg, Felix Meiner.

KOMATSU, E. and WOLF, G. (1996) *Premier Cours de linguistique général (1907) d'après les cahiers d'Albert Riedlinger,* Oxford, Pergamon.

KOMATSU, E. and WOLF, G. (1997) *Deuxième Cours de linguistique général (1908-1909), d'après les cahiers d'Albert Ridelinger,* Oxford, Pergamon.

KOMATSU, E. and HARRIS, R. (1993), *Troisième Cours de linguistique général (1910-1911), d'après les cahiers d'Emile Constantin,* Oxford, Pergamon.

LOCKE, John (1993) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London, Dent.

METZ, Christian (1971) *Langage et cinéma*. Paris, Larousse.

_____

NORMAND, Claudine (2004) «System, Arbitrariness, Value» in Carol Sanders, *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 88-106.

PEIRCE, Charles Sanders (191931-1966), in HARTSHORNE, C., WEISS, P., and BURKS, A.W., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, (*CP*), 8 vols, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press.

PUTNAM, Hilary (1979) *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers* 2 vols. London, Cambridge University Press.

RUTHROF, Horst (2010) «How to Get the Body Back into Language» in *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio* 2, pp. 136-151.

RUTHROF, Horst (2000) *The Body in Language*. London, Cassell.

RUTHROF, Horst (1997) *Semantics and the Body: Meaning from Frege to the Postmodern*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

TARSKI, Alfred (1956) *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics,* Oxford, Clarendon Press.

WIGGINS, David (1992) «Meaning, Truth-Conditions, Propositions: Frege's Doctrine of Sense Retrieved, Resumed and Redeployed in the Light of Certain Recent Criticisms», in *Dialectica* 46, pp. 61-90.

WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (2005) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell.

WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig (1976) «Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness», in *Philosophia* 6, pp. 3-4.