

INSTITUTION AND DIFFERENCE

On the timeliness of Ferdinand de Saussure

An inconspicuous life, of solitary, daring thinking, capable of producing forceful innovations. This is the case of Ferdinand de Saussure: born in Geneva, to a family with many generations of exponents of the natural sciences, he was a brilliant student of linguistics in Leipzig and Berlin. So brilliant that at the age of 21 he had already published what was considered «the finest book on historical linguistics ever written», *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*. Back in Geneva in 1891, after an important talk delivered at the Congress of Orientalists (1894), Saussure nearly fades into obscurity. He teaches there, after having done so for ten years in Paris; and in Geneva he develops his research with feverish activity. But for the international scientific audience, his contributions are only a distant memory. In 1907-11 he teaches courses on general linguistics, which he would have liked to teach twenty years earlier. His lectures - published posthumously by his students Albert Bally and Charles Sechehaye - outline the original characteristics of his theoretical output, which was to influence the social sciences of the 20th century. He died - forgotten and in solitude - in 1913.

The *Cours*, whose first edition came in 1916, was later printed in many editions and translations, more than most other scientific texts. Saussure was not prolific, and many generations of scholars have struggled in pursuit of *his* truth. Following World War II, in fact, thanks to the efforts of Hjelmslev and Benveniste, the works of Godel, and then of Engler and De Mauro, the *Cours* was suitably translated, clarified in its organization, and provided with annotations; the radical impact of Saussure's thought had been grasped.

Today we ask ourselves: what is the timeliness of the laboratory-Saussure? Which concepts, among those created by the Swiss linguist, can still work in a fertile way in the present of critical thought, beyond the concerns of specialists? One hundred years after the death of Ferdinand de Saussure

(22 February 1913), we would like to try to answer these questions, in a series of encounters, to contribute to the commemorations that will take place over the months to come in Geneva, Paris and Italy. Saussure and critical thought, more than Saussure and the academe. Were we to focus on the latter, in fact, we would have to come to terms, apart from certain praiseworthy exceptions, more with the lack of attention than with the enterprising care that has gone into the productive relationship with a classic. Saussure, prior to and better than anyone else, thinks about the radical arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. Nothing in language, a system and form that should be distinguished from the substance of the words (the concrete act of statement) and also from that particular species-specific organ that is the language faculty, is imposed by the nature of objects or by the constitution of the state of things. Both the signified (*signifié*), the limit or singularity in the series of possible meanings, and the signifier (*signifiant*), the articulation in the series of possible acoustic images, are entirely arbitrary in their link, which constitutes the linguistic sign. And it is precisely the arbitrary nature of language, an infinite set of virtual acts of words, that makes it into what Saussure calls «pure institution». The radical arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, in fact, implies the radically social character of language. Likewise, the radically social character of language is accompanied by its radically historical nature. Still more precisely: arbitrary and social, then, at the same time an institution that cannot be grasped due to its sudden, voluntarily determined mutation, and one that is always open to molecular alteration, to historical becoming.

The principle of difference is complementary to that of arbitrariness. In the *Cours*, Saussure says: «in language there are only differences», «differences without positive terms». Taken individually, signified and signifier are the result of a pure differential, negative relationship;

prior to or independent of this relationship, they cannot exist. Likewise, the value of every linguistic sign exists only starting with the differential relationship that inscribes it in the historical-natural language as form or system.

Pure institution made of differences, and differences of differences. This definition can suffice to help us grasp the practical power and timeliness of Saussure's thought. As Luis Prieto has said, Saussure laid the groundwork for a theory of institutions. In the era of crisis of state sovereignty and the laws of labor-value, in the era in which language becomes the main productive resource, just as financial values lose any type of conventional relationship with the nature of goods (including that particular type of goods that is the workforce), in the era of globalization and its crisis, to still think, with Ferdinand de Saussure, about language as pure institution and system of differences means thinking about the present in a radical way, beyond common sense, beyond specializations.

Institution and difference: the themes of the encounters have also influenced the choice of their sites. Not just official institutions, including the Swiss Institute in Rome and the University of Calabria, but also informal institutions of a new nature: the ESC self-managed atelier and Teatro Valle Occupato. The Saussure of Institution and Difference conquers the city of Rome, going beyond the traditional places of education, combining in an unprecedented way the formal and informal institutions that strive to consolidate cultural experimentation and critical thinking and, with them, to make new forms of life proliferate.

Participants: Jean-Paul Bronckart (University of Geneva), Felice Cimatti (University of Calabria), Rossana De Angelis (University of Calabria), Marina De Palo (University of Salerno), Emanuele Fadda (University of Calabria), Claire Forel (University of Geneva), Daniele Gambarara (University of Calabria), Federica Giardini (University of Rome 3), Daniela Ielasi (editor of "Fatti al cubo", weekly of the University of Calabria), Kenneth Liberman (University of Oregon), Maria Pia Marchese (University of Florence), Marco Mazzeo (University of Calabria), Marina Montanelli (University of Florence), Francesca Murano (University of Florence), Monica Pasquino (S.CO.S.S.E. association), Massimo Prampolini (University of Salerno), Christian Puech (University Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3), Francesco Raparelli (Free Metropolitan University - Rome), Gianni Rigamonti (University of Palermo), Thomas Robert (University of Geneva), Claudia Stancati (University of Calabria), Paolo Virno (University of Rome 3)

Organized by: Cercle Ferdinand de Saussure, Istituto Svizzero di Roma, Università della Calabria

Info: www.differenzadesaussure.istitutosvizzero.it

PROGRAM

14 - 15 March h 9.00
University of Calabria, Cosenza

CONFERENCE: TEACHING SAUSSURE, STUDYING SAUSSURE

12 April h 17.30
Swiss Institute in Rome

LECTIO MAGISTRALIS BY TULLIO DE MAURO (SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME)

19 April, h 10.00
Teatro Valle Occupato, Rome

DAY OF STUDIES: LINGUISTIC ANIMAL AND POLITICAL ANIMAL

3 May h 17.00
ESC - self-managed atelier, Rome

DEBATE: LANGUAGE AS A MODEL FOR ANY OTHER INSTITUTION?