

Introduction: Reflecting on Ferdinand de Saussure’s intellectual legacy in the modern context of the development of semiotics and history and epistemology of ideas

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In this special issue we publish the works of researchers from several countries (Switzerland, Estonia, Italy and the United Kingdom) who agreed to our proposal to reflect on Ferdinand de Saussure and his legacy in the framework of modern semiotics, as well as history and epistemology of ideas. The name of Saussure is often mentioned in modern works on semiotics and its history and Saussure is sometimes considered as one of the founders of the “science of signs”; at the same time, Saussure as such is often equated to the most famous book published in 1916 under his name – the *Course in General Linguistics*. Even if this issue reflects partly this tendency too, all its contributors understand the importance of distinguishing between this book and Saussurean ideas as such, drawing cues, as far as possible, from all the Saussurean texts available to us, and considering Saussure’s legacy not dogmatically, but as a field on which we have not finished working yet.

John Joseph’s article about Saussure’s dichotomies and the “structuralist semiotics” opens the issue. The *Course in General Linguistics* is known to be based on several dichotomies (such as *langue* and *parole*, signified and signifier, arbitrary and motivated, synchrony and diachrony, *langue* and *langage*, etc.). Showing how several scholars – including some generally considered to be “classics” (Louis Hjelmslev, Charles Bally, Valentin Voloshinov) thought about these oppositions, Joseph offers an epistemological analysis of the “Saussurean grounds” of what today is often called “structuralist semiotics”. The authors of the following articles also reflect on Saussure and his theories when discussing the intellectual heritage of scholars such as Roland Barthes (and also Louis Hjelmslev) (article by Alain Perusset), as well as Luis Jorge Prieto, one of the last successors of the Saussurian “tradition” in Geneva linguistics (article by Israel Chavez). Alain

Perusset dwells on a “dialogue” between Hjelmslev and Barthes, discussing, in particular, the notions of connotation and denotation which he traces back to the works of the Danish linguist. If, according to Perusset, the “Saussurean” (dyadic) model of the sign proposed in the *Course in General Linguistics* still matters for (certain) semioticians, in time this model has become enriched, in particular, with the theoretical findings by Hjelmslev. All these reflections allow Perusset to discuss some misunderstandings which can be found in today’s works on semiotics and which, in this particular case, concern the notions of connotation and denotation. Staying mainly within the framework of the historiographical approach, Israel Chavez analyses the evolution of Luis Prieto’s thought and the importance of the *Course in General Linguistics* for this scholar. As concerns the problem of relations between linguistics and semiotics, Chavez insists on the fact that, not generalizing the principles of linguistics and following what is said in the Saussurean *Course*, Prieto supposed that the linguistic principles constituted particular cases of the semiotic ones.

Two contributors to the present volume, Emanuele Fadda and Anne-Gaëlle Toutain, write about Saussure partly going beyond the “traditional” humanities as such and touching upon some problems which sometimes rather tend to be discussed by natural sciences, speaking, for example, about biology and biosemiotics (let us emphasize that this approach is not so common today: biosemioticians most often reason in the “categories” introduced not by Saussure, but by Charles Sanders Peirce). Toutain’s article offers an epistemological analysis of biosemiotics as such – especially the works of its “classic authors” Jesper Hoffmeyer, Kalevi Kull, Donald Favareau, Claus Emmeche and Marcello Barbieri – within the framework of the Saussurean and Bachelardian approaches. Comparing biosemiotics and biolinguistics on the basis of several parameters that simultaneously oppose them and bring them closer to each other (like the attitude of scholars towards the very phenomenon of language), Toutain discusses biosemiotics using the term ‘scientific ideology’ (in the sense of Georges Canguilhem), at the same time establishing a parallelism between biosemiotics and structuralism, “another scientific ideology”. Reflecting upon the Saussurean non-acceptance of the so-called “biological perspective” in linguistics, Emanuele Fadda goes back to the famous point of view expressed in the *Course in General Linguistics* about the necessity of studying language “from within”. The Italian researcher insists on the important philosophical premises of this opinion, and in particular on the need for a double gaze – those of a linguist and of a speaking subject – towards language as an object.

The last three articles of the volume by volume (by Patrick Sériot, Daria Zalesskaya and Ekaterina Velmezova) discuss the reception of Saussure (or rather of

the *Course in General Linguistics*) in the Russian-speaking intellectual “tradition”. Zaleskaya dwells on the reflection of one particular Saussurean idea (“language studied in and for itself”) in the didactical conception of Paul Boyer, the author of a textbook of Russian for French-speaking students which was widely known and very popular in France during several decades of the past century. At the same time, Zaleskaya reflects on the possibility of linking semiotics and didactics today, with support from Boyer’s intellectual heritage. Sériot and Velmezova reflect on the reception of the *Course* in Soviet linguistics, which gives a certain idea of the situation in the Soviet humanities of the corresponding time period in general. Saussure (and once again, first of all the *Course in General Linguistics*) could be perceived by Soviet linguists in different ways at different times. The Lausanne scholars consider the obvious Soviet “anti-Saussurism” of the 1930–1950s (in which even linguists who were each other’s ardent opponents would converge) in the light of the reception of the “theory of hieroglyphs” and of the “Marxist-Leninist sign theory” (Sériot) and in the context of the famous discussion on linguistics conducted in the USSR in 1950 (Velmezova). This discussion was followed in the Soviet Union by the gradual emergence of an increasing interest in structuralism and in the work that many scholars still today consider fundamental for this scientific trend: the Saussurean *Course*. This interest later resulted in an interest in semiotics: it was not for nothing that in the early structuralist works written in the USSR, *de facto* there could be an equal sign between structuralism and semiotics. As to the particular (implicit) understanding of both sign and semiotics itself in the works of the corresponding period, it was reflected in the subsequent history of Soviet semiotics, the most significant episode of which remains the emergence and the activity of the Moscow–Tartu/Tartu–Moscow semiotic school.

Thus, the content of the volume reflects both the reception of Saussure by modern semiotics and certain views of historians and epistemologists of science on the Saussurian intellectual heritage.

One of the landmark texts in modern semiotics is Jacques Lacan’s seminar on “*La lettre volée*”, Baudelaire’s translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The purloined letter”, in which the plot turns on the fact that an incriminating letter which the police search for but cannot find turns out to be hidden in plain sight (in this respect, see Joseph’s article in this issue). The articles in this special issue show how the impact of Saussure’s semiotic model has been hidden in plain sight across the 20th century and on to the present. Everyone names Saussure as the co-founder of the discipline, along with Peirce, and then it appears as though, having lit the fuse, he fled before the explosion which saw all his ideas transformed, very differently in different places, with little of himself remaining.

Yet reading the studies collected here, we see how present he has been through all these transformations – as a consistent interlocutor for all who have followed. Establishing this novel perspective will help us tie together the diverse threads of semiotic research, which sometimes have little in common other than what they retain from that Saussurean model which has been hidden in plain sight all along.

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P.P.S. We follow the rules of the *Sign Systems Studies* journal's style, even if in many cases they were different from the ones accepted in the majority of current linguistic publications.