

# Language as an “independent unit”: Ferdinand de Saussure vs. Paul Boyer

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**Abstract.** Didactics and semiotics are two fields that have been interconnected for a long time. Russian language teaching in France in the 20th century, especially in its first half, had several interesting didactic features closely related to the understanding of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theoretical conceptions. Through the works of influential Slavist professor Paul Boyer (1864–1949), some of Ferdinand de Saussure’s ideas became reflected in French didactics in a particular way, providing the basis for a new method of teaching Russian as a foreign language. The article offers an analysis of the textbook *Manuel pour l’étude de la langue russe* by Boyer and Nicolas Spéransky, as well as of the teaching method “language-in-itself”, with the objective to identify the references to the *Course in General Linguistics* and to consider their reflection in didactics.

**Keywords:** Paul Boyer; pedagogy; “language-in-itself” methodology; translation; Ferdinand de Saussure

Semiotics and pedagogy are two fields that have been closely connected for a long time (Nöth 2010: 1). In the pedagogical process, a variety of semiotic systems are often used – thus, mention can be made of different methods of teaching of foreign languages, in which different sign systems are used, such as drawings, including in particular the so-called visual dictionaries, in which the main emphasis is put on the visual representation of an object rather than on its verbal representation, videos, games, and even “going outside” the classroom to perform a particular task set by the teacher (see, for instance, Radford 2013: 185).

Russian language teaching in France in the 20th century, especially in its first half, had several interesting didactic features closely related to a particular understanding and practical application of Saussurean ideas. This was primarily due to Saussure’s former pupil, Paul Boyer (1864–1949), who was a key figure in the teaching of Russian in France in the first half of the 20th century. Examining

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Boyer's most famous textbook (Boyer, Spéransky 1951[1905]), one can identify references to certain "semiotic" concepts – such as translation,<sup>2</sup> semiotic system and/or process,<sup>3</sup> as well as sign,<sup>4</sup> implicitly reflected in his methodology of teaching Russian as a foreign language. In the present article we are going to focus on how Boyer's didactics were influenced by one of the basic ideas of the *Course in General Linguistics* published under the name of the founder of semiology, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913).

Paul Boyer was born in Cormery, a small village in France about 230 km southwest of Paris. After graduating from the prestigious *Lycée Louis Le Grand*, he entered the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, where he attended Saussure's lectures between 1885 and 1886. Antoine Meillet (1866–1936), another student at the EPHE, became his friend and colleague (Mazon 1950: 7). It was thanks to Saussure that Boyer became interested in linguistics, which determined his further professional path (Mazon 1949: 4). Boyer also studied in Moscow (Breuillard 2005), Leipzig and Warsaw (Mazon 1950: 7). He had many contacts with Russians: before 1914 he spent holidays in Saint Petersburg, and his wife was Russian (Mazon 1950: 7). From this marriage he had a son, Georges, who became a pilot and died in action in 1916 (Kantchalovski, Lebetre 1946: 10–11).

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<sup>2</sup> What is sometimes meant by translation is a cognitive activity that brings about the passage from a given utterance to another utterance considered as equivalent. Translatability stands as one of the fundamental properties of semiotic systems and as the very cornerstone of the semantic approach in the humanities. Indeed, translation comes in between the existential judgment "there is meaning" and the possibility of saying something about it. "To speak of meaning" is both to translate and to produce signification (Greimas, Courtés 1982: 351).

<sup>3</sup> We may say of semiotic systems that they are the object of knowing sought after by general semiotics (or semiology). An object such as this is not definable in and of itself but only in terms of the methods and procedures which permit its analysis and/or construction. Any attempt, therefore, to define semiotic systems and/or processes (whether as a human faculty, a social function, or a means of communication, etc.) reflects a theoretical attitude which treats the set of "semiotic facts" in its own way (Greimas, Courtés 1982: 285).

<sup>4</sup> "The sign is a unit of the manifestation plane constituted by the semiotic function, i.e., by the relation of reciprocal presupposition (or solidarity) that is established between entities on the expression plane (or signifier) and on the content plane (or signified) during the language act [...]. The extra- or para-semiotic meaning of the term sign does nonetheless exist and is sometimes introduced into semiotic or linguistic literature. In this case, sign commonly designates 'something that is there in order to represent something else'. As used in semiotics, it then denotes any form of expression assigned to translate an 'idea' or a 'thing' – corresponding to the concept of formant. Such a use of the term presupposes a particular conception of language, i.e. as a stock of "labels" to be attached to preexistent objects, as a pure and simple nomenclature. [...] Another distribution of signs, of an intrinsic nature, seems possible: it would specify signs according to whether they belong to a given type of semiotic system" (Greimas, Courtés 1982: 296–298).

Working both as a teacher and as an administrator at the *École des Langues Orientales*, where he started in 1908, Boyer actively taught Russian and was involved in political activities. During the First World War and the February Revolution in Russia he actively promoted rapprochement between Russia and France. He taught Russian language to French soldiers who were sent to Russia. Boyer, as well as his students, participated in several negotiations between Russia and France, and he was often a mediator and a coordinator of foreign relations between those countries. After Bolsheviks came to power, Boyer focused on assistance to Russian emigrants (Pondopoulo 2011: 348; Galkina 2018: 139–143).

Boyer also had an enormous influence on the linguistic world of French Slavists of his time. Many articles were published in linguistic periodicals in his honour, culminating in a 1925 collection of essays in homage to him (Mazon 1925). He had professional contacts with almost all of the important linguists of that time: Antoine Meillet, Charles Bally, Nikolaj Trubetzkoy, Roman Jakobson *et al.* (Chevalier 1997: 36), and virtually all the authors of textbooks of Russian of that time were either his students or his colleagues and friends. Traces of Boyer’s ideas about the “archaic nature” of the Russian language, based on a comparison of the Russian language with dead languages and its opposition to other “more developed” languages of Western Europe (see Zalesskaya 2020), can be traced implicitly or explicitly in all the textbooks of the time, and the authors themselves often mention their friend and teacher in their introductions (Mazon 1949; Train 1949; Labry 1949; see Zalesskaya 2020). According to the reminiscences of one of his students, Boyer was considered as the best expert of Russian not just in Paris, but in all of Western Europe. For his reputation as a teacher of Russian language people from all over Europe and even from America came to France to meet him (Dvojchenko-Markova 1949: 19). Due to his rich contacts, he was famous in the circles of the Russian teaching community across the Atlantic: in 1949, the 17th issue of the journal *A Guide to Teachers of the Russian Language in America* was entirely devoted to the memory of Boyer (Avtonomov 1949a). It was he who initiated Russian language studies at university level in France; it was he who served as the main instructor to prepare specialists in Russian language in France for almost 50 years (Breuillard 2005: 232).

Unfortunately, Boyer did not leave behind any fundamental body of scholarly work.<sup>5</sup> His colleagues pointed to his heavy administrative workload and intensive teaching activity (Mazon 1949: 5; Breuillard 2005: 233), as well as his desire to devote himself to practice rather than to theory (Mazon 1949: 5). The French

<sup>5</sup> That is why Meillet did not consider Boyer as a “linguist”, but as a “grammarian” (Breuillard 2005: 233).

linguist and Slavist Jean Train provided the following list of Boyer's texts: *Verb Accentuation in Russian* (1895), a French-Russian dictionary of the end of the 16th century (1905), some translations (1898), some articles<sup>6</sup> and lectures (Train 1949: 7–8). And, of course, it is impossible not to mention his textbook *Manuel pour l'étude de la langue russe*,<sup>7</sup> written in collaboration with Nicolas Spéransky (1861–1921); this book ran nine reprints and for a long time it was the main textbook of Russian as a foreign language in France (Mazon 1950: 8–9). In 1906, the textbook was translated into English and in 1916 it was reprinted for American students by the American historian and Slavist Samuel Northrup Harper (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]).

This textbook presented Boyer's "language-in-itself" methodology. The author himself noted that the *Manuel pour l'étude de la langue russe* reflected only half of his method. He personally did not want to publish his method entirely because the issues that mattered most for him were not theoretical things, but personal contacts with students (Dvojchenko-Markova 1949: 19; Avtonomov 1949b: 24).

The name of the concept 'language-in-itself' seems to refer to the famous closing phrase of the *Course in General Linguistics*: "[...] the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself" (Saussure 1959[1916]: 232). We can assume that the idea of studying language "in-itself" that appeared and was known during the epoch in question was linked to the *Course*; as we have mentioned before, Boyer studied under Saussure and, according to Boyer himself, he was also the teacher of Charles Bally (1865–1947), who, in his capacity as editor of the *Course*, wrote that final sentence. Boyer could apply this idea in a didactic aspect in his *Manuel pour l'étude de la langue russe*, at the same time connecting it with the popular character of the direct teaching method<sup>8</sup> used for the teaching of languages of Western Europe.

*Manuel pour l'étude de la langue russe* by Boyer and Spéransky was first published in 1905 and has since been reprinted many times with absolutely no

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<sup>6</sup> Here, only his work about political relationships between Russia and Finland (Boyer 1940) can be mentioned; the other two works found are obituaries/articles about Antoine Meillet and Louis Léger (Boyer 1923; 1936).

<sup>7</sup> The American translation was published under the title *Russian Reader* (Boyer, Spéransky 1915[1906]).

<sup>8</sup> Direct teaching is a method of teaching of foreign languages developed at the end of the 19th century by Wilhelm Viëtor (1850–1918) (who was teacher) and the linguist Otto Jespersen (1860–1943). It consists of teaching practical language skills, primarily in their oral form. Vocabulary material is selected according to the criteria of communication topics, and grammatical material is limited to those concepts that correspond to the modern norms of the language in question.

changes in the main text<sup>9</sup> (Boyer, Spéransky 1921; 1935; 1940; 1945; 1947; 1951; 1957; 1961; 1967[1905]), except for the last edition in 1967, that appeared after the death of the authors.<sup>10</sup> It consists of texts written by Leo Tolstoy: in total, there are thirty stories in the textbook, all but the last of which are stories Tolstoy wrote for children, while the last story, “Three deaths”, was written for an adult audience (Boyer, Spéransky 1951[1905]: xix). Each text is accompanied by grammatical and lexical comments in footnotes, where all words and grammatical facts are explained separately in the context of each story. These notes are divided into three groups: notes on word forms [*notes sur les formes*], notes on syntax [*notes de syntaxe*], and notes on things [*notes de choses*], which represent vocabulary and sociocultural information (clothing, shoes, housing, hairstyles, baptism, wedding, death, etc.) (Boyer, Spéransky 1951[1905]: vii–xii).

After the body of the textbook, the authors have placed an “Appendix” [*Appendice*], which contains phonetic, grammatical, and “lexical minimums” and sociocultural information about the country of the target language. Another part is devoted to the vocabulary of the Russian language. There are no separate exercises in this textbook.

The pedagogical concept of “language-in-itself” implied the study of the Russian language exclusively “in-itself”,<sup>11</sup> that is, without any reference or comparison with the native language of the students or any other foreign language. Boyer<sup>12</sup> “presents” his methodology as innovative, which is emphasized in the Introduction to the textbook:<sup>13</sup>

*Moreover, even the title Reader of the volume which, at first sight, seems to be just a collection of texts, needs justification.*<sup>14</sup> (Boyer, Spéransky 1951[1905]: ii)

<sup>9</sup> Since 1945 Boyer added in the introduction one paragraph concerning the Reform of the Russian orthography in 1917/18 (Boyer, Spéransky 1945[1905]). For more information see Zaleskaya 2020.

<sup>10</sup> However, even in this case, the changes did not concern the methodology used (Boyer, Spéransky 1967[1905]), which is why we will present only the first edition of 1951.

<sup>11</sup> We have no data on whether the author planned to apply this method to the study of other languages. However, judging from the introduction to the textbook, one can assume that this method could have been used to teach other languages as well.

<sup>12</sup> Although Spéransky’s name appears on the cover, the introduction is written on behalf of Boyer alone. Therefore, when we speak of the “language-in-itself” methodology, we are referring to Boyer, not to Boyer and Spéransky.

<sup>13</sup> English editions miss some sentences that appear in the French original. Those sentences are given in italics (in my translation, D. Z.), the rest are quotations from the English edition (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]).

<sup>14</sup> In the original: “*Au reste, ce nom même de Manuel, en tête d’un ouvrage qui, au premier regard, semble n’être qu’un recueil de textes, a besoin de justifications*”.

The real object of this Reader is to present a faithful and adequate picture of spoken Russian and of its means of expression. This aim does not differ from that which authors of descriptive grammars have in view. But whereas the latter subject the phenomena of a language to a systematization which is always more or less artificial, throwing them out of proportion and falsifying their values, another method, the one suggested by the direct study of a language, has been applied here.

Instead of model sentences, awkwardly reduced to an unnatural simplicity, actual texts are put before the reader; and, as at the very outset peculiarities of form, of syntax, or of idiom meet him in his reading, these texts are accompanied by notes which explain each difficulty as it is met. (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]: ii)

The methodology proposed by Boyer presents any foreign language as an “independent unit” with no resemblance to any other language (Boyer, Spéransky 1951[1905]: iv). If we follow this methodology, then language is studied through texts where virtually every form and every lexical unit is explained separately and purely in a specific context: “The example always precedes the rule, the language itself being taken as the starting-point and not as the point of arrival” (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]: ii). Footnotes indicate a translation in a specific context without any other examples of the use of the relevant language elements (Boyer, Spéransky 1951[1905]: i). The author opposes this method to what is now called ‘contrastive linguistics’ – the study of theoretical grammar and comparisons of a language under study with other languages. For Boyer, theoretical grammar is the object of study by linguists engaged in the study of foreign languages at a different, deeper level rather than the object of a “language-in-itself” methodology (Boyer, Spéransky: i–xv).

[...] To help him surmount these many difficulties, the student finds at his disposal grammatical summaries, collections of texts, and dictionaries. But much time will be lost before he has acquired enough grammatical knowledge to master texts which have no commentary to explain them, and his patience will suffer by this study of theoretical grammar, which keeps him at a distance from the language itself. (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]: i)

Boyer is of the same opinion regarding comparisons of the language being studied with any other language, stressing that this is not a task for a beginner:

In dealing with Russian texts, it would be a mistake of method for a student to recognize phenomena found in his own language or in any other, dead or living, with which he might have some acquaintance. Linguistic comparisons, if they are not to be merely vain amusement, are not for the beginner. The student will

understand that a language must be studied in itself [...]. (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]: i–ii)

Nevertheless, Boyer recognizes the need for a certain minimum knowledge of grammar; otherwise studying according to his methodology will not be possible. However, he emphasizes that this knowledge must be minimal. By minimal knowledge, he means the following:

The student beginning the study of this Reader is expected only to possess a minimum knowledge of Russian grammar: the alphabet; some elements of pronunciation learned, if possible, from a native teacher; a fair notion of the declensions; a general view of the conjugations; some idea of the phenomenon called aspect of verbs, and, in particular, of the opposition of the two aspects termed respectively perfective and imperfective. A student of average aptitude can, it would seem, acquire such knowledge in a week at the most, and that in any grammar which he may have at hand. This first stock of grammatical knowledge is quite sufficient, but so much is indispensable. (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]: ii)

In the part of the Introduction to the textbook where the author explains some of the comments (notes on morphology, syntax, household items), we can find a solid confirmation of the idea that a language should be studied without comparison with any other language:

[...] [they are] special laws of syntax which, being peculiar to Russian, are disguised under forms which a foreigner could not correctly analyze without assistance [...].

[...] For the important factor in the study of languages is not translating but understanding and remembering; *and the method called translation method*,<sup>15</sup> *should no longer be used*.<sup>16</sup> (Boyer, Spéransky 1916[1906]: iv–v)

Taking into account Boyer’s methodology, we can say that language is an “independent unit” only with regard to other languages; at the same time, it is supposed to be closely related to culture (an entire section of the textbook is devoted to sociocultural information about Russia).

<sup>15</sup> What is meant here is the grammar-translation method which was widely used in the teaching of foreign languages until World War I. The basis of this method was written speech; the learning goal was to read literature in a foreign language and be able to translate it. Vocabulary was taught with words from the readings, and grammar was studied with a deductive approach using rules and translation exercises.

<sup>16</sup> In the original: “*et le procès de la méthode dite méthode de traduction n’est plus à faire*”.

Therefore it seems possible to assume that for Boyer (when it comes to teaching Russian to French students), French and Russian “worlds” represent two different realities. When studying a foreign language, the author radically opposes the process of translation (whether it is an adapted or an original text). Apparently, in the pedagogy, the two different languages, for Boyer, are incompatible wholes. Boyer insists on this approach when learning a foreign language at the elementary level. Most likely, translation of texts, according to Boyer, becomes possible with a proper mastery of a foreign language, given the fact that Boyer himself translated Russian works into French (Train 1949: 7–8). Therefore we may presume that Boyer’s concept of language as an “independent unit” may be a case of a more general phenomenon of what is now considered as semiotic closure (Lemke 2000). To put it differently, in the didactic perspective the language represents a “closed unit” which should not be compared with other languages, but it becomes an “open unit” at a higher level of studies.

It appears that “language-in-itself”, one of the main ideas of the *Course in General Linguistics*, was used by Boyer in a very particular way as regards the didactics. Boyer’s ideas may seem radical, especially from a modern perspective, but one cannot deny that the *Manuel pour l’étude de la langue russe* was a very original method of teaching the Russian language. Some of its ideas appear to be perfectly up-to-date, for example, the topic of whether text translation is advisable in teaching and learning a foreign language, for instance Russian, at an elementary level.

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### **Язык как «самостоятельная единица»: Фердинанд де Соссюр и Поль Буайе**

Дидактика и семиотика – области, давно связанные между собой. Преподавание русского языка во Франции в XX веке, особенно в первой его половине, имело ряд интересных дидактических особенностей, непосредственно связанных с пониманием теоретической концепции Фердинанда де Соссюра. В трудах влиятельного профессора-слависта Поля Буайе некоторые идеи Фердинанда де Соссюра были применены к опыту французской дидактики, что положило начало новой методике преподавания русского языка как иностранного. В статье – с целью выявления отсылок к *Курсу общей лингвистики* и рассмотрения их отражения в дидактике – предлагается анализ учебника *Manuel pour l'étude de la langue russe* П. Буайе и Николая Сперанского.

### **Keel kui „iseseisev üksus“: Ferdinand de Saussure vs. Paul Boyer**

Didaktika ja semiootika on kaks valdkonda, mis on teineteisega seotud olnud kaua aega. Vene keele õpetamist Prantsusmaal 20. sajandil, eriti selle esimesel poolel iseloomustasid mitmed huvitavad didaktilised jooned, mis olid tihedalt seotud Ferdinand de Saussure'i teoreetiliste kontseptsioonidega. Mõjuka slavisti ja õpetaja Paul Boyer' (1864–1949) tööde kaudu hakkasid mõned Ferdinand de Saussure'i ideedest prantsuse didaktikas teatud kindlal viisil peegelduma, pannes aluse uuele vene keele võõrkeelena õpetamise meetodile. Artiklis esitatakse Boyer' ja Nicolas Spéransky õpiku "*Manuel pour l'étude de la langue russe*" ja "keel-iseeneses" õpetamismeetodi analüüs eesmärgiga teha kindlaks osutused "Üldkeeleteaduse kursusele" ning vaadelda nende peegeldumist didaktikas.