

Ferdinand de Saussure, reread in 2025

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Review of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Saussure*. (Joseph, John E., ed.), 2025. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 370 pp.

Prepared by John Joseph, one of the best modern specialists in the theoretical heritage of Ferdinand de Saussure, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Saussure* was published in 2025 (Joseph 2025). The volume is fresh evidence of Joseph's continuing interest in the famous Genevan linguist, and already his name as the editor of the book under review can serve as the best advertisement for the *Handbook*: Joseph's work on the famous Genevan linguist, published by Oxford University Press in 2012 (Saussure, Joseph 2012), received enthusiastic comments and reviews (see, for instance, Bergounioux 2012; Bisconti, Chidichimo 2016; Dilberman 2022). Having already been translated into two languages,² it is an important monograph for anyone studying Saussure's life and intellectual legacy. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Saussure* is certainly an indispensable work of reference, too.

Among the authors of the studies published in the *Handbook*, there are remarkable specialists who have been working on various aspects of the Saussurean intellectual legacy, including several younger scholars. Joseph particularly dwells on this fact in the editor's Preface:

The contributors to this volume include members of a younger generation of superb Saussure scholars who rarely publish in English. The opportunity to get their voices heard across the English-speaking world – which of course includes Asia, where other European languages are little taught – motivated me to grasp the opportunity to edit this book. (p. xiv)

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² French translation: Joseph 2021; Brazilian Portuguese translation: Joseph 2023.

Also in the Preface, the editor presents some challenges of the publication and the volume in general, drawing attention to the diversity of themes and subjects broached within the framework of the general Saussurean studies. The last words of the Preface must sound particularly captivating, especially for those who are only beginning to discover the endlessly exciting “Saussurean universe”:

Attentive readers may find that the authors of the chapters in this volume see certain aspects of Saussure in somewhat varying ways, and it would be a disservice to all concerned – the authors, readers and Saussure himself and the army of linguists and semioticians enriched by his teaching – to try to iron out the creases. One thing on which we all agree is that Ferdinand de Saussure is an inexhaustible font of inspiration, and we hope that readers of this volume will come away understanding why we think so. (p. xix)

Joseph’s Preface to the volume is followed by Reinier Salverda’s text entitled “Foreword: Saussure in search of language” (pp. xx–xxxvii). It immediately asks several questions: “Why Ferdinand de Saussure? What is so important about him? What defines his contribution to linguistics, his lasting impact, his continuing relevance?” (p. xx). Reminding the debates around these questions, which have taken place in recent years, at the same time Salverda tries to explain why Saussure continues to be so important for the language sciences. A possible answer to this question runs as follows:

Saussure, on his lifelong quest for a new, sound and scientific basis for linguistics, always kept exploring the properties of the many-splendored thing that is language – an inexhaustibly complex object of wonder, of fascination and investigation – trying to find out what it really is, searching from many different angles and in many different directions. (p. xxxii)

The “Preface” and “Foreword” are followed by the four comprehensive parts of the book containing the contributions of prominent Saussurean scholars. The first part discusses Saussure’s life and work and contains texts by Joseph (“Saussure’s life and career”, pp. 3–20), Gabriel Bergounioux (“Saussure’s published linguistic work before the *Cours de linguistique générale*”, pp. 21–43) and Pierre-Yves Testenoire (“Saussure’s unpublished manuscripts”, pp. 45–64). The “*Cours de linguistique générale*/Course in General Linguistics” lies in the centre of the second part of the volume, containing the articles by Estanislao Sofia (“How the book was compiled”, pp. 67–87), Daniele Gambarara and John Joseph (“Introduction, general principles and synchronic linguistics”, pp. 89–119), and Carita Klippi (“Diachronic linguistics, geographical linguistics, questions of retrospective

linguistics and conclusions”, pp. 121–146). The third part of the collection discusses structural linguistics and semiotics after Saussure, with contributions by Frans Gregersen (“Early structural linguistics”, pp. 149–166), Margaret Thomas (“Post-war structural linguistics”, pp. 167–187), Claire Forel (“The Geneva School”, pp. 189–208), Paul Bouissac (“Semiology/Semiotics”, pp. 209–223) and Ken Hirschkop (“Structuralism beyond linguistics and semiotics: Structures, the avant-garde and wild thinking”, pp. 225–245). Finally, the fourth part of the book, entitled “Key themes and topics”,³ contains texts by Marina De Palo (“Saussure and his contemporaries”, pp. 249–275), Liesl Yamaguchi (“Saussure and synaesthesia”, pp. 277–298), Emanuele Fadda (“Saussure and Peirce”, pp. 299–315), Shaojie Zhang and Yanfei Zhang (“Saussure in China”, pp. 317–338), Ecaterina Bulea Bronckart and Jean-Paul Bronckart (“Psychological structures and processes in Saussure’s work”, pp. 339–360). The volume also includes the lists of figures (p. vii), tables (p. viii) and contributors (pp. ix–xiii), as well as an “Index” (pp. 361–370) of proper names (especially) and of some key concepts mentioned in the book.

Why might this book be of interest to those interested in semiotics? On the one hand, already in the Preface, Joseph recalls the current opinions about Saussure as “the father of modern linguistics and one of the two parents of semiotics” (p. xiv).⁴ The notion of semiotics is, of course, largely present in the book, as already the “Index” shows (p. 368). Among the authors who participated in the volume, there are such well-known specialists in semiotics as Paul Bouissac (see, for instance, Bouissac 1998; 2004; 2025) Emanuele Fadda (see, among others, Fadda 2004; 2013; 2002; Velmezova, Fadda 2022) and Daniele Gambarara (2017). However, different parts of the book are of unequal academic value regarding semiotics. Particularly interesting in this regard are the articles by Bouissac and Fadda published in the third and fourth (correspondingly) parts of the book.⁵

The text “Semiology/semiotics” by Paul Bouissac begins by stating: “During the past one hundred years, references made to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) have been far more frequent in the semiotic literature than in linguistic publications” (p. 209). At the same time,

³ Already the title of this part indicates that, more than the others, it reflects the scientific interests of the editor of the book John Joseph: in Saussure’s scientific heritage, a variety of “key themes and topics” could be found.

⁴ Joseph contests them: “[I]n a literal sense Saussure never founded anything” (p. xiv).

⁵ In general, this example shows that the boundaries between the different parts of the volume could not have been drawn unambiguously: some topics touched upon in the articles could be considered in other parts of the book too.

(t)he reason for which Saussure is repeatedly acclaimed in the literature as one of the two fountainheads of semiotics – the other being the American polymath Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914 [...]) – is likely based on the need for scientific paradigms to identify a ‘father’ rather than on any evidence that would show that Saussure took an active part in elaborating the basis for the specific, comprehensive domain of research he had wishfully designated, in passing, ‘signology’ or ‘semiology’. (p. 210)

Bouissac examines the interest in the semiological model presented in the *Course in General Linguistics* on part of French philosopher Charles Serrus (1886–1946) and Belgian linguist and semiotician Eric Buyssens (1910–2000); he also talks about the ways it was adopted/adapted in later works by Louis Hjelmslev, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Roland Barthes. The final part of the article, in which the author tries to answer the question why Saussure still matters for semiotics, will probably be especially interesting for semioticians.

The article by Fadda deserves semioticians’ attention as well: this text examines the correlation – both similarities and differences – between Saussurean ‘semiology’ (concerned with language – *langue* – signs) and Peircean ‘semiotics’ studying other kinds of signs. Researchers usually talk about the differences between the two models – so that pointing out their common aspects seems especially interesting. Historians of science could be particularly interested in reading about a “shared scientific milieu; or, the birth of modern semiotics from the spirit of nineteenth-century science” in Fadda’s article (p. 300). Semioticians may be intrigued by reading Fadda’s discussion of Saussure and Peirce in the context of his reflections on “(t)he model of sign (dyadic vs triadic; icon/index/symbol vs arbitrary/motivated)” (p. 305). Finally, within the framework of interdisciplinary semiotic research, the question raised at the end of the article – “Is semiotics a form of philosophy?” (p. 310) – sounds particularly captivating.

Both Saussure’s model of the sign and the Saussure–Peirce “relationship” are discussed in other articles of the collection, so that semioticians will certainly find the volume fascinating. Besides, representing an important milestone in Saussurean studies, the book will certainly be of undoubted interest to specialists in many other fields of academic knowledge: linguists, historians, didacticists, historians of linguistics and – of course – semioticians.

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