

Can linguistics and semiotics conceive man without language?

Emanuele Fadda¹

Abstract. Saussure’s refusal to adopt a biological perspective in linguistics and to consider the problem of the origin of language does not imply a struggle against the natural and biological aspects of language. Rather, it derives from the awareness that it is impossible to look at language “from the outside” if one wants (as Saussure considers obligatory for the linguist) to drop into the perspective of the speaking subjects. This tendency to consider the nature of language “from within” has a strong philosophical importance.

Keywords: Ferdinand de Saussure; language; nature; history; philosophy

One of the aspects of Saussurean thought that is often mentioned is his deliberate rejection – that we find in the *Course in General Linguistics*² – of all investigation into the origin of language: for Saussure, “*la question de l’origine du langage n’a pas l’importance qu’on lui attribue généralement. Ce n’est même pas une question à poser*” (CLG: 105).³

What is the meaning of this rejection? Given that Saussure was born into a family of scientists, to categorize his conception of language as a pre-Darwinian, or even an anti-biological one would be a bit hasty. In order to discuss the Saussurean position, we must first of all distinguish (with Graffi 2005 and others) between *two* questions: the origin of *language* as a cognitive faculty vs. the origin of *languages* (i.e. idioms, *langues*).⁴ Giorgio Graffi (2005: 4) believes that the focus on the origin of languages (what he calls the *philological* approach, as opposed to the *philosophical* approach) motivated both the “ban” contained in the statutes of the

¹ Department of Humanities, University of Calabria, ponte Pietro Bucci, 87036 Arcavacata di Rende, Cs, Italy; e-mail: emanuele.fadda@unical.it.

² In the following, I will adopt these abbreviations: *CLG* for Saussure 1916, *CGL* for Saussure 1959, *ELG* for Saussure 2002, *WGL* for Saussure 2006. I will always refer to the original French text providing English translations in footnotes.

³ “The question of the origin of speech is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking” (*CGL*: 71f.).

⁴ For a more extensive discussion, see also Auroux 2007.

Société de Linguistique de Paris (to which I will return later) and the Saussurean position. To me, however, it seems that both aspects (in their interweaving) are present, and that Saussure's approach cannot be dismissed as mere disinterest in the philosophical significance of the question. This may become clearer if we do not focus our attention exclusively on the *Cours*.⁵

Saussure's claim that the origin of language is not an issue to be investigated by linguists is the result of an epistemological stance, the reasons for which can only be expressed through a paradox. Paradox is a standard argumentative form for Saussure, and the *Course in General Linguistics* is filled with paradoxes.⁶ However, the paradox I will discuss, dating from 1891, is not specific to Saussure,⁷ since it expresses one of the main issues every philosophy of language must deal with:

Ce qui est clair, comme on l'a répété mille fois, c'est que l'homme sans le langage serait peut-être l'homme, mais qu'il ne serait pas un être se rapprochant même approximativement de l'homme que nous connaissons et que nous sommes, parce que le langage a été le plus formidable engin d'action collective d'une part, et d'éducation individuelle de l'autre, l'instrument sans lequel en fait l'individu ou l'espèce n'auraient jamais pu même aspirer à développer dans aucun sens ses facultés natives. (ELG: 145)⁸

Man is defined by language, but language did not spring up from nowhere, like a spell transforming a naked ape into a human being. Still, the linguist has to consider the actual working of language *as we know and experience it*. Linguistic research can never grasp something-that-is-almost-language-but-still-is-not-such, because it is bounded by the very definition of language as-it-currently-works (“*le seul objet réel de la linguistique, c'est la vie normale et régulière d'un idiome déjà constitué*”; CLG: 105).⁹

⁵ In this paper, I will restrict myself to a small selection of quotations. A more extensive review of Saussurean texts (with arguments in some ways similar to mine) can be found in Robert 2017.

⁶ In some cases, the paradox is pushed almost to contradiction. For instance, in the chapter on “Immutability and mutability of the sign”, Saussure affirms that “we can speak of both the immutability and the mutability of the sign” because “the principle of change is based on the principle of continuity” (CLG: 108f. = CGL: 74).

⁷ Actually, the most famous expression of this paradox is due to Wilhelm von Humboldt (see Graffi 2005: 14).

⁸ “What is clear, as has been repeated countless times, is that a human being without language might well be *human*, but he would in actual fact be very different from the human being that we know and that we are, precisely because language has been such a massive driving force behind collective action on the one hand, and individual education on the other; it has in fact been the instrument without which neither the individual nor the species could have in any way aspired to develop its innate faculties” (WGL: 95).

⁹ “The only real object of linguistics is the normal, regular life of an existing idiom” (CGL: 72).

Even if this position does not belong to Saussure alone, his particular way of presenting it and the consistency it shows with the whole of his theory deserve close attention.

1. The idea of *history* in the 1891 Inaugural Lectures

Saussure's Inaugural Lectures, held in November 1891,¹⁰ are the starting point of his twenty years of teaching activity in Geneva, culminating in the *reprise*¹¹ of the Third Course in General Linguistics (May-June 1911 – collected by Bally and Sechehaye in the section “General principles” of *CGL*). The Inaugural Lectures have a general and introductory character, a (relatively) high degree of written processing (they are not a simple line-up – so they were probably originally intended for publication), and they are (probably) contemporary with one of Saussure's strongest efforts at theoretical systematization – the *Double Essence* (*ELG*: 15–88).

The mood – so to speak – of these lectures is at least as remarkable as their content: Saussure addresses an audience of non-specialists, and deftly presents his somewhat revolutionary views as trivial truths of linguistics which nobody can deny.¹² I will focus here on the first Lecture, and specifically on the opening, where Saussure deals with the subject of the legitimacy of linguistics as a science. This problem was a long-lasting one: we find it (albeit in a slightly different fashion) at the start of *CGL*, where a kind of epistemological self-maintenance work is explicitly posed as the third task of general linguistics.

The legitimacy of a science is given first and foremost by its *autonomy*. Saussure does not accord a full status to service sciences, the task of which would be limited to providing data and information to other, “real” sciences. A real science must have a real object, an object of *its own*. In this context, we find a sharp criticism – not without irony and sarcasm – of the very idea of linguistics as a natural science. Would it be possible, for Saussure, who was born into a family of renowned

¹⁰ I am not interested here in the problem of whether they were actually given as three separate introductory lectures, unconnected with his courses (probably not: see Chidichimo 2010).

¹¹ After a talk with L. Gautier (6 May 1911), Saussure decided to add some elements not originally included in his plan, and he asked his students to tear up their notebooks and to insert a new fascicule. This new part is often called “reprise”, from the first word of Constantin's notes (see Saussure 2005[1910-1911]: 237, sheet 308a), and it shows many analogies with the Inaugural Lectures of 1891. Saussure had the time to make a last course (on Etymology: see Murano [ed.], 2013) the next semester, but the *reprise* is, by the opinion of many scholars, the summit of his reflection.

¹² This kind of plain speaking, by the way, is what Saussure praises in the style of William Dwight Whitney three years later (see *ELG*: 203 = *WGL*: 150 f.).

scientists, to assume a naïve anti-biological stance? It is unlikely. The urgency to assign linguistics to the field of human sciences or history, that is, to the field of “actes humains, régis par la volonté et l’intelligence humaines, – et qui d’ailleurs doivent être tels qu’ils n’intéressent pas seulement l’individu mais la collectivité” (ELG 150)¹³ is driven by the need to avoid a reductionist idea of language. The merging of individual and social factors (or rather their being considered as the two sides of *langue*) is incompatible with the conception of language as a *mere* biological function (both from the phylo- and ontogenetic points of view). As a historical matter, then, language is not just what human beings *are*, but *something people do*, a part of their endless activity which becomes somewhat independent from each of them. The idea of *langue* as ‘*produit social*’ (‘social product’) that we find in the CLG (25, 30, 44; CGL: 9, 14, 23) is rooted in this idea of history, but in the Inaugural Lectures Saussure does not yet seem to give the idea of product (i.e. something that is autonomous from praxis and those who produce it) its proper relevance.

2. *Langues, langage, langue: A terminological shift*

The distinction between *langue* and *langage*, as it is framed in the CGL, is rightly considered as one of the cornerstones of Saussurean thought, and to ignore it is incompatible with any appeal (however generic) to Saussure. Still, we have to be careful in defining the terms and the relation between them. I will define ‘*langage*’ as the bio-cognitive capacity, often spoken of as defining the human being, to acquire one or more historical-natural¹⁴ languages (*langues*); inversely, a ‘*langue*’ is an abstract,¹⁵ cultural system of signs, which can be acquired by a human being “equipped” with *langage*. *Langue* as the object of the linguist concretely means *this or that langue*, and the so-called “panchronic laws” (see CLG: 134f. = CGL: 95f.) concern *langage*, not *langue*. Some readings of Saussure – starting from the last phrase of CGL, which ought to be ascribed to Bally, and including Barthes, and Lacanian *lalangue*, among others – have encouraged the idea of *langue* as a quasi-Platonic realm, but a look at Saussure’s own writings suffices to show that it is not so.

¹³ “[...] *human actions*, dependent on human intelligence and will – and, moreover, necessarily interest not only the individual but the community” (WGL: 99).

¹⁴ In the Italian tradition of linguistics and philosophy of language which originates with Tullio De Mauro (see for instance the Index in De Mauro 1982, *ad vocem*), the expression “historical-natural languages” (*lingue storico-naturali*) is used to differentiate human languages or *langues* (different from one another, but referring to the same natural faculty, only belonging to *homo sapiens sapiens*) from other semiotic codes.

¹⁵ The abstract/concrete opposition is one of the major issues in linguistics, and in the history of linguistic ideas. For a first framing, see Joseph 2018a: Ch. 9.

In the Inaugural Lectures, we have ‘*langage*’ (in the singular), and ‘*langues*’ (almost always in the plural, except twice). The relation between *langage* and *langues* is clearly defined by Saussure:

*Langue et langage ne sont qu'une même chose; l'un est la généralisation de l'autre. Vouloir étudier le langage sans se donner la peine d'en étudier les diverses manifestations qu'évidemment sont les langues est une entreprise absolument vaine, et chimérique; d'un autre côté vouloir étudier les langues en oubliant que ces langues sont primordialement régies par certains principes qui sont résumés dans l'idée de langage est un travail encore plus dénué de toute signification sérieuse, de toute base scientifique véritable.*¹⁶ (ELG: 146)

In these lectures, we also find the infinitival noun ‘*parler*’ (‘speaking’), which is not reducible to CLG’s ‘*parole*’ (‘speech’), but merely refers to the *empirical fact* that people actually speak, or rather to the unbroken temporal *continuity* of the exercise of speech among human beings. Indeed, continuity vs. discontinuity of language in space and time is the general topic of these lectures (which show great analogy with the section “Immutability and mutability of the signs”, also belonging to the *reprise*).

If we turn to the only two occurrences of ‘*langue*’ in the singular, we find that they are quite significant. The first one (ELG: 152 = WGL: 100 f.) develops a kind of Saussurean *topos*: complaint about the uselessness of every metaphor and comparison for understanding the nature of language.¹⁷ In this case, Saussure (just as in CGL) uses *langue* in relation to *object*: whereas *langage* is the field of phenomena, *langue* is the proper object of linguistics, which gives it its *raison d'être*.¹⁸

The second occurrence is even more interesting, because Saussure refers to the “human instinct” applied to *langue*. The word ‘instinct’ has a double signification in Saussure: it means the *faculty* of language as a biological factor (see CLG: 25 =

¹⁶ “The language system (*langue*) and the language faculty (*langage*) come back to one and the same thing; one is the generalization of the other. To claim to study the phenomenon of language without bothering to study its manifestations in various *languages* is an entirely vain and empty undertaking; on the other hand studying languages while forgetting that they are organized according to certain fundamental principles which make up the very idea of *langue* is a task even more devoided of serious meaning, or of any true scientific basis” (WGL: 95f.).

¹⁷ This *topos* occurs in various texts (see for instance ELG: 220, WGL: 154). The counterpoint for the statement is the continual work on analogies (see Note 38 on p. 413 f. in De Mauro’s comment) that fit up to a certain point, but always with a crucial difference (the best known of them being the game of chess).

¹⁸ This epistemological stance may be viewed as intermediate between the position of Peirce, who stresses the possible influence of every science on each science (see CP 8.60), and that of Chomsky, who claims a substantial autonomy for the study of language, even if it is conceived as a part of a naturalistic approach to psychology; see Chomsky 2000.

CGL: 9f.), but also the semi-automatic application by the speaking subjects of the epi-linguistic (unformal and semi-conscious, but rigorous and efficient) knowledge of a given *langue* (see CLG: 220 = CGL: 160). Sometimes, the two meanings are coexistent and inextricable (see CLG: 262 = CGL: 192; ELG: 266 = WGL: 191). This character of the Saussurean notion of instinct (namely, its overlapping the traditional ‘nature vs. nurture’ opposition – whereas the current notion of instinct is bound to a nativist interpretation) gives us some hints about Saussure’s attitude toward the relation between phylogeny and ontogeny of language.¹⁹

3. A *diktat* against biology?

The Statutes of the *Société de Linguistique de Paris*, approved in 1866, contained an explicit rejection of all enquiry on the origin of language: (Art. 2). “*La Société n’admet aucune communication concernant, soit l’origine du langage soit la création d’une langue universelle*”.²⁰ That interdiction must be historically contextualized: what was rejected was the tradition of speculative studies; we may also say that, in the end, avoiding any interference of religious and nationalistic quarrels in scientific issues was an advisable policy in those years when the Austro-Prussian war was close to breaking out, and the Franco-Prussian War would follow in four years’ time. Moreover, linguists did not have at that time the same possibility of combining linguistic and genetic data²¹ as nowadays (see Cavalli-Sforza 2001). In any case, the approach of the young *Société* (created in 1863) was not overtly anti-scientific.²² As to Saussure, his arguments against the very idea of language as a natural entity also arise from his knowledge of natural sciences, which allows him to recognize that biological categories can be strongly misleading. The end of the first lecture and the beginning of the third (see ELG: 155 f., 163 ff. = WGL: 103, 109 ff.) are dedicated to explaining that the life of language²³ (or the life of a single language) is not a life cycle, but rather an emanation of the continuity of *parler* (the act of speaking, or the fact that people use to speak), which can last forever, and has no “natural” end. Yet Saussure never forgot the role of biological

¹⁹ I have tried to illustrate this idea further in Fadda 2017: 32ff.; 2018; 2021; 2022.

²⁰ “This Society does not allow any communication concerning the origin of language, or the creation of a universal language” (my translation, E. F.). The website, *Société de Linguistique de Paris (SLP)* can be found at <http://www.slp-paris.com>.

²¹ Indeed, we could say that modern genetics was born in the same year, when the essay of Gregor Mendel on the hybridization of pea plant (Mendel 1866) was published. Its English translation can be found at <http://www.esp.org/foundations/genetics/classical/gm-65.pdf>.

²² Although perhaps it was anti-materialistic; see SLP: “Histoire de la SLP”.

²³ It is possible that Saussure borrowed this expression from Whitney 1875.

organs in linguistic activity, and he insists (mostly in the first Course) on localizing *langue* in the brain (see for instance *CLG*: 26 [with an explicit reference to Broca's area], 28–32, 37–38, 44, 98, 171 = *CGL*: 11–15, 18–19, 23, 66, 123). Such an idea of language/*langue* is very far from what we would call an *externalist* view of language, like the one held by the proponents of the 'extended mind' conception (see Clark, Chalmers 1998; Clark 2008).

In short: Saussure's position cannot be framed as a rejection of biology, nor as a claim against the possibility of a biological study of language, but rather as an assertion that this kind of research is different from linguistics.²⁴ This means that we must search elsewhere to find why he thinks that linguistics cannot inquire into the origins of language.

4. Seeing language from inside

Linguists can study *langage* only from the perspective of a speaking being – and so semioticians do, as far as they adopt a language-centred point of view. An intuitive, though abstract way to show this is by appealing to the idea of continuity. So, let us try to take seriously the Saussurean idea of a temporal continuity of language, and approach it using Peircean tools – namely, the example of the chalk line on the blackboard (see *CP* 6.203), used by Peirce in 1898 to illustrate the idea of a continuous continuity.²⁵ The origin of language could be conceived as the starting point of a half-line. But how could we see it simultaneously from inside and outside? If we are *in* it, we can only switch from one point to another, and we never get to a final (or initial) point. To “see” the starting point of the half-line (and the half-line as a whole), we should place ourselves at another level of continuity, which allows us to see that continuity as a discontinuity in relation to the other level.

The issue of the autonomy of sciences, from which we started, finally finds its true nature: it is not a need for order-for-the-sake-of-order, or the joining up of positivism as the mere filling of a chest of drawers where everything is in its place. Just like the Peircean continuum, Saussure's *objet* is inescapable. Once we have assumed a perspective, we see all that is visible within that given perspective (*point de vue*), but we also assume some limitations, namely the impossibility (both in

²⁴ Saussure's views on the “life” of language have been compared with physics, particularly thermodynamics (see Pétrouff 2004; Bulea, Bronckart 2009). The current reflection on Darwinism (see e.g. Pievani 2005; Minelli 2009) may allow a reasonable comparison more than the older one (often flawed by hidden teleology and Spencerism).

²⁵ On mathematical continuity in Peirce, see Havenel 2008; 2015. On the broad philosophical scope of this subject in Peirce's philosophy, see Parker 1998.

terms of factual and deontological necessity) to see other things. *C'est le point de vue qui fait la chose*: the point of view actually *creates* the thing(s) to see. However, *who* is the creator, or the subject, of the point of view adopted by the linguist?

5. *Moi est un autre*

The struggle of the human sciences to disengage from philosophy has sometimes led them to adopt uncritically a myth of objectivity. Linguistic objectivity, however, is not comparable to the objectivity of the entomologist (Saussure's father was an entomologist, as it happens), observing an insect through a microscope. This condition of linguistics is shared with other human sciences, even if not in so strong a way. The theoretical impossibility of including inquiry into the origins of language within the scope of linguistics concerns not only our relation with the phylogeny of our species, but also the relation with our own ontogeny: language has made and keeps *each* of us "the human that we know and that we are" (as stated in the quote from which I started). What Thomas Robert (2017: 235) calls 'presentism', actually is just that: the birth of language is renewed by every speech act. Linguists, then, need a kind of participant observation, as they are part of the speaking community they observe.²⁶ This attitude is well exemplified in a note included in the file of Saussurean manuscripts held at the Houghton Library at Harvard:

Je donnerais bien peu pour connaître "les sentiments d'Octave après la bataille d'Actium" [...], mais tout, pour avoir été pendant trois minutes Octave lui-même, soit après soit même longtemps avant cette bataille, et même encore pour avoir été un instant ma cuisinière, et avoir aperçu le monde à travers ses yeux, sans perdre p. ex. la faculté de comparer ce que je vois avec les singulières images que je rapporterais de cette excursion. (Houghton Library, bMS Fr 266[6], ff. 75–75v.; see Parret 1993; 1996; D'Ottavi 2012)²⁷

Saussure does not wish to know "the content" of Octavius' (or the cook's) consciousness – he would like to *share* this consciousness somehow, while still keeping his own. This desire – impossible to satisfy – of living all lives and each

²⁶ Cf. Robert (2017: 235): "*L'impossibilité logique [...] est toujours ancrée dans l'expérience des sujets parlants*".

²⁷ "I would not give much to know 'Octavius' sentiments after the battle of Actium' [...], but I would give everything to *be* Octavius himself for three minutes, before or after that battle, and even to be my cook for a while, and to perceive the world through her eyes, without losing the faculty to compare what I see with the images that I would take away with me from that journey outside myself" (my translation, E. F.).

life, which is not specific to linguistics (one may say, for instance, that it is shared at least by literature), leads to the awareness that *my consciousness* is the only tool I have for identifying with the consciousness of others, though I cannot “be” them. In short: as a linguist, I cannot – and I ought not – escape from being a speaking subject myself, though a special one. To the “ordinary” speaking subject, the linguist is something akin to what the literary critic is to the naïve reader (see Eco 1979). The linguist is a speaker, a meta-speaker, but he cannot truly be a mere speaker.

This kind of desire of a *double consciousness* is also the drive (sometimes referred to as *semiotic gaze*) that we can find in the very spring of structural semiotics, e.g. in Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. Semioticians are not only scholars, but are personally involved in ordinary cultural life: they “speak” the cultural language they study, or another one maybe – but in every case their scholarly object is not detached from the object of their ordinary experience as human beings.

6. Philosophy at the heart of linguistics

In conclusion, we can say that linguistics is (and must be) a technical study (whose object is *langue* as an abstract system) with a philosophical significance. If we choose to adopt a Saussurean point of view in linguistics, we consistently have to adopt a semiotic perspective (a true linguistics is possible only within the more general scope of a theory of signs),²⁸ but also a philosophical stance. We must do science about our own ontogeny, about what allowed us – each and every one – to become the being “we know and we are”. The one and only kind of objectivity that is possible for linguists comes from the full assumption of their subjectivity as speakers. If philosophy – in a Wittgensteinian fashion – is the art of clarifying thoughts and delimitating the non-thinkable from the realm of the thinkable (Wittgenstein 1922: 4.112, 4.114, 5.6), this is a properly philosophical issue.

Some years ago, these claims would have sounded somewhat “heretical”, but the current stream of advanced Saussurean studies, based on extensive philological work on old and new texts (where *CGL* – when it is not wholly rejected – is not the only source, and Saussure’s thought is viewed as set apart from – if not opposed to – its structuralist interpretation) is changing the landscape. Philosophical issues such as subjectivity, time and consciousness are currently at the centre of attention. Some scholars (see Stawarska 2015) have even come to interpret Saussure’s thought as a kind of phenomenology and to compare it with Hegel and Husserl.

²⁸ This is not at all obvious, as the most influential linguistic theoretical stream of the second half of the 20th century – coming from Chomsky – clearly disregards the issue.

It would be misleading, however, to oppose this “philosophical” (or semiotic) Saussure to a (merely) “linguistic” one: his semiotics and his philosophy lie at the heart of his linguistics. Saussure’s philosophy of language arises from the linguist’s reflecting on his status as a speaking subject, on his own feelings about words.

This necessary continuity between linguistics, semiotics and philosophy bears a strong significance for the linguists, for the semioticians, and for the philosophers. For (Saussurean) linguists, there is no “absolute” objectivity: they just cannot be *mere* professionals of inquiry locked up in their specialist field. As to the semioticians, and even the philosophers, who take Saussure as an inspiration, they are obviously legitimated to do so without being professional linguists, but they can never forget that linguistics is not a Wittgensteinian ladder (see Wittgenstein 1922: 6.54) that we can throw out after using it, once we have gained the epistemological perspective it can bring to us.

“Bad” structuralism came to see Saussure as an ancestor whose task was exhausted in the act of starting a new era in semiotics and epistemology, but maybe it was a narrow way of looking at his thought. As we *always* have to climb Wittgenstein’s ladder again, we always have to rethink²⁹ this continuity (between actual communication and speaking activity, linguistics, semiotics, and philosophy) as rooted in our very experience as human, linguistic beings. We do not need to overcome the semiotic and philosophical paradoxes within Saussurean linguistics, but rather to *go through* them (they are inescapable, as far as they have philosophical significance), walking side by side with this “eternal wanderer”,³⁰ facing the same issues, and even the same discouragements he had to struggle with.³¹

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²⁹ The third task Saussure assigned to linguistics (“to delimit and define itself”: see *CLG*: 20; *CGL*: 6) has not, in my opinion, a strictly epistemological scope, but a broader philosophical one.

³⁰ See Joseph 2018b.

³¹ I would like to thank Giuseppe Cosenza and John E. Joseph for their comments on previous versions of this paper.

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Могут ли лингвистика и семиотика представлять человека «без языка»?

Отказ Соссюра от принятия биологической точки зрения в лингвистике и от рассмотрения проблемы происхождения языка не означает отрицания естественных и биологических аспектов языка. Скорее, оно вытекает из осознания того, что невозможно смотреть на язык «со стороны» при намерении (а Соссюр считал это обязательным для лингвистов) исходить из перспективы говорящего субъекта. Эта тенденция рассматривать природу языка «изнутри» имеет большое философское значение.

Kas keeleteadus ja semiootika suudavad ette kujutada keeleta inimest?

Saussure'i keeldumine lingvistikas bioloogilist perspektiivi kasutusele võtmast ning keele päritolu probleemi käsitlemast ei viita keele looduslike ja bioloogiliste aspektide vastu võitlemisele. Pigem tuleneb see arusaamast, et keelt on võimatu vaadata "väljastpoolt", kui soovitakse (nagu Saussure seda keeleteadlase puhul kohustuslikuks pidas) lähtuda kõnelevate subjektide vaatenurgast. Tendents vaadelda keele olemust "seestpoolt" on filosoofiliselt vägagi oluline.