Some Misunderstandings in Benveniste's Reading of Saussure's "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign"

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is two-fold. In the first part, it is an attempt to explain the "nature of the linguistic sign" according to the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure, in his Course in General Linguistics, *manages to propose a new direction to linguistics which remains quite influential and essential to this day. In his* Course, *Saussure claims that language should be studied as a sign system. In other words, according to this view, the process of meaning-making does not take the relation of the word to an outside object. Meaning happens based on the relation and difference between signs within a system. Hence, the nature of the linguistic sign is 'arbitrary, differential, and relational.' In the second part of the paper, Emile Benveniste's reading of Saussure is investigated; it will be demonstrated that some aspects of Benveniste's interpretations are flawed.*

Keywords: Saussurean Linguistic Sign, Benveniste's Readings, Linguistics, Semiology

کج فهمی‌های بنونیست از آرای سوسور درباب «سرشت نشانه زبانی»

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چکیده

هدف این مقاله دوگانه است. در بخش نخست، سعی بر آن است که «سرشـت نـشانه زبانی» بـر اساس نظریات فردینان سوسور تشریح گردد. سوسور در درسنامهٔ زبان‌شناسی عمومی خود مـسیر جدیـدی را بـرای زبان‌شناسی ترسیم می نماید که تا به امروز مطرح و باقی است. سوسور ادعا می‌کند که زبان باید بـه عنـوان یک نظام نشانه‌ای مطالعه شود. به بیان دیگر، براساس این نظریه روند معنی‌سازیِ نسبتِ کلمه را بـا جهـان بیرون نفی می‌کند. معنی بر اساس منطق رابطه و تفاوت بین نشانه‌ها در درون نظـام زبـانی پدیـد مـی‌آیـد. بنابراین، سرشت نشانه زبانی اختیاری، تفاوتی و رابطـه‌ای اسـت. در بخش دوم ایـن مقالـه، پـس از ارایـه و بررسی خوانش امیل بنونیست از سوسور، نشان داده می‌شود که برخی از جنبه‌های خـوانش بنونیـست دچـار اشکال است.

کلیدواژه‌ها: نشانه سوسوری، خوانش بنونیست، زبان‌شناسی، نشانه‌شناسی

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Introduction

Linguistics has undoubtedly benefited enormously from the findings of Structuralist Linguistics and philosophy of the early twentieth century. These findings not only propose new definitions of language but also suggest a new meaning-making process. Yet this essay claims that many of the concepts and notions introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) are misunderstood to a great extent. Therefore, one should first re-read these innovations in the context of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. But the problem is even more pervasive. Quite surprisingly, one of the very first readings of Saussure's ideas, Emile Benveniste's (1902-1976), seems not to be an exception. This essay will point to three instances of Benveniste's misreading of Saussure's ideas.

Saussure and the nature of linguistic sign

Saussurean terminology has dominated the discussion of language since early twentieth century. Although Saussurean 'semiology' covers a broad field,[1] here the focus will only be on Saussure's arguments regarding the notion of a language sign. Interestingly, Saussure's formulation of "the nature of the linguistic sign" starts with a critique of the theory of the name: "Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only - a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names." (Saussure 1986: 148) Saussure criticises this conception on the following grounds. He argues that postulating language as simply a "naming-process"

> assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words... ; it does not tell us whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature... ; finally, it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation - an assumption that is anything but true. (Ibid)

Saussure instead proposes another explanation for the linguistic sign: "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-

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1 - Indeed, one of the great achievements of Saussure's semiology is its implications for most of the human sciences. This, of course, can be seen in positive and negative terms. On the one hand, it has opened up a new perspective to various disciplines. The study of politics, theology, sociology, and psychology among others is approached semiologically, i.e., based on the significance of the sign system in relevant representations and interpretations. On the other hand, Saussurean semiology has had a totalising attitude towards human sciences. In other words, the semiology of human sciences has been claimed to be an encompassing approach that can explain the representation and hermeneutics of all human sciences in a 'genuine' way.

image" (Ibid: 149). To him, within the sign there is a *form that signifies,* which he proposes to be called the *signifier*, and a *concept that is signified*, what he calls the *signified*. These 'two faces' of the sign become united to create 'the sign' which in itself refers to an outside "referent" or what one calls the world, reality or things. Saussure thus tries to include the concept or idea within the linguistic system and refuses the assumption that the concept exists autonomously.

Saussure then proposes his *Principle I* suggesting that the sign has an 'arbitrary nature'. According to this principle, there is no natural bond between the signifier and the signified (Ibid: 150). Saussure is quick to mention that the term 'arbitrary' does not imply that "the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker". He is aware that there are many elements involved and that a sign cannot be changed without resistance. What he means by the term 'arbitrary' is that the signifier "is unmotivated, i.e., arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified" (Ibid: 151). In other words, the sound-image of the word is incidentally associated with the concept or the idea. It is important to point out here that this formulation, being Saussure's first principle of the structural theory of language, points to the fact that still the "(formal) *reciprocity* is maintained" in the relation between the signifier and the signified (Parret 1975: 118).

The argument that the nature of the sign is arbitrary in the sense that is described above might not seem a novel idea. Saussure is not the first to suggest this. He acknowledges this by saying that "[n]o one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign to it its proper place" (Saussure 1986: 150). And this is precisely what Saussure does in his *Course*. The importance of Saussure's theory lies in the fact that he places this hypothesis in a more complex theoretical framework in which, as a result, "consequences are numberless" (Ibid.). These 'consequences' are the concern of this paper.

In defence of his theory of the arbitrary nature of the sign, Saussure starts by arguing against the idea that concepts are pre-existent. He contends that the signifieds are not the same in different languages. He cites various examples for this. He then argues that "[i]f words stood for preexisting concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true" (Ibid: 164). Therefore, the theory of the arbitrariness of the sign leads us to the fact that we not only choose arbitrary signifiers for the signifieds but also the selection of the signifieds is arbitrary. Hence, we are not faced with pre-existent primary fixed concepts. We create and use new concepts in relation to the other concepts. This is one

of the most important findings of Saussurean semiology. This argument paves the way for the idea that was further developed proclaiming, in Jonathan Culler's words, that "[e]ach language articulates or organizes the world differently. Languages do not simply name existing categories, they articulate their own" (Culler 1976: 22). Therefore, Saussure's theory suggests that the signifiers and the signifieds are *arbitrary* themselves and that they are *relational* or *differential*. The signifieds and the signifiers start to get used merely because "they are what the others are not" (Ibid: 26). They are chosen and used only due to their difference from the adjoining signifieds and signifiers. Thus, language has an "'arbitrary' way of organising the world into concepts or categories" (Ibid: 23).

Before moving onto the critiques of Saussure, the final point that needs to be mentioned here is the fact that, although Saussure argues that "both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately," he eventually suggests that "their combination is a positive fact" (Saussure 1986: 167). This goes back to the idea that, for Saussure, the signifier and the signified, while being arbitrary, when joined within the sign make a unity and a strong bond. They are two sides of "a sheet of paper" that is language (Ibid: 160). Let us leave this last point aside and return to it later in readings of Saussure.

Benveniste and the nature of linguistic sign

Perhaps Emile Benveniste's reading of the *Course* is one of the earliest readings of Saussure's ideas. Benveniste in his short article "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign" (the same title as the subtitle in Saussure's *Course*), published in 1939 in Copenhagen, offers an interesting reading.

I have a few reservations about Benveniste's reading of Saussure. I believe that elaborating these points will help to clarify Saussure's theory even more. Benveniste starts his critique by reiterating that the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound image. He adds that despite this, "immediately afterwards he [Saussure] stated that the nature of the sign is arbitrary because 'it actually has no natural connection with the signified'" (Benveniste 1987: 77). To Benveniste, this is not possible because he takes "it" as the referent which has not been included in Saussure's primary theory: "It is clear that the argument is falsified by an unconscious and surreptitious recourse to a third term which was not included in the initial definition. This third term is the thing itself, the reality" (Ibid: 77 - 8). I would argue that here Saussure is simply saying that *the signifier and the signified* have no natural connection. In other words, "it" refers to "the signifier" and not "the thing". Saussure is dealing

with the linguistic structure and he correctly does not invoke *the referent* (or "the thing" or "the reality" as Benveniste says) within this structure.

Benveniste's other objection is to the presumption that the signifier or the signified are arbitrary *on their own* as much as *in relation to one another*. He brings an example: "To decide that the linguistic sign is arbitrary because the same animal is called *bæuf* in one country and *Ochs* elsewhere, is equivalent to saying that the notion of mourning is arbitrary because in Europe it is symbolized by black, in China by white" (Ibid: 78). I believe the process of reasoning behind this objection is flawed. Although Saussure believes that the signifier and the signified are arbitrary on their own, he does not argue that the reason for the arbitrariness of the signifieds is the arbitrariness of the sound-image (signifier). Signifiers and signifieds are selected not only in an arbitrary manner but also in a separate way. The relation between the arbitrariness of the signifier and the signified is not that of a *causal effect*. Benveniste's contention that in Saussure's theory signifieds are arbitrary is not the whole story. Saussure does not say that the signifieds are arbitrary but rather that they are situated in the linguistic structure of each language in a *relational and differential* manner. For instance, Saussure argues that the notion of 'mourning' is not pre-existent in a fixed form in all languages. Instead, he would rather see it as a floating concept with different associations. Saussure says: "Language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier. This is one of the consequences of the arbitrary nature of the sign" (Ibid: 80). This position is far from the assumption that the concept of 'mourning' is an arbitrary concept in itself.

Benveniste concludes from his preceding argument that in fact the connection between the signifier and the signified "is not arbitrary". The relation is on the contrary "necessary". In other words, it is necessary in one's consciousness to see the concept and the sound-image as identical (Ibid: 78). He concludes that these two in fact "evoke each other" (Ibid.). Benveniste explains:

> The signifier and the signified, the mental representation and the sound image, are thus in reality the two aspects of a single notion and together make up the ensemble as the embodier and the embodiment. The signifier is the phonic translation of a concept; the signified is the mental counterpart of the signifier. The consubstantiality of the signifier and the signified assures the structural unity of the linguistic sign. (Ibid: 79)

But this is precisely what Saussure is saying when he takes the signifier and the signified as the two sides of a sheet of paper. There is no doubt that the process of expression and communication within a linguistic structure is possible only when one believes in a sense of a necessary relation between the signifier and the signified. Yet, I do not subscribe to the point that this necessary relation is in opposition to the arbitrary nature of the sign. I would think this relation is *necessary and arbitrary*.

The conclusive point made by Benveniste is that he is impressed by Saussure's argument that, because of its arbitrary nature, the sign is both *mutable* and *immutable*. Here, Saussure presents a paradox. He interestingly suggests that language is mutable because the nature of its formation is arbitrary. Yet at the same time the arbitrary nature of language leaves no firm and rational ground to challenge the linguistic sign. In other words, this arbitrariness makes the sign even more fixed and immutable.

This reminds one of Derrida's argument that the more abstract and arbitrary forms of language (alphabetic in comparison to, for instance, hieroglyphs and ideograms) give language more 'power'. This position towards the signs becomes clearer when we look at the way Derrida compares Chinese ideograms with alphabetical language. Despite the association between Chinese ideograms and the immediacy of a language that attempts to bridge the gap between sign and meaning, Derrida argues that ideograms are also subject to dissemination. In other words, this form of language is still part of the representational system of language: "The discourse of the Chinese, then, entangles itself in the disseminations of meanings and accents" (Derrida 1982: 104). Derrida, in "Scribble (writing-power)," shows clear preference for the alphabetic language against ideogramic language. His argument is interesting since he argues that in fact alphabetic language is more 'powerful' than the ideogramic or hieroglyphic one because it is not so narrow. The substitution of the alphabet in place of the hieroglyphs has made the mark more powerful because the abstraction has made it easier to turn away from the mark itself and get closer to the thing signified (Derrida 1998: 64, 65, 67, 70).

However, Benveniste argues that,

> [i]t is not between the signifier and the signified that the relationship is modified and at the same time remains immutable; it is between the sign and object; that is, in other terms, the objective *motivation* of the designation, submitted, as such, to the action of various historical factors. What Saussure demonstrated remains true, but true of the *signification*, not the sign. (Benveniste 1987: 80)

Benveniste is correct in asserting that Saussure has not dealt with the "object" enough in his theory. But, as Stephen Moore reminds us, we should not assume that Saussure doubts the existence of the referent as a result. Saussure leaves the "object" out of his theory on the nature of linguistic structure simply because the object "is not part of the internal structure of language" (Moore 1994: 15).

Conclusion

The above comments are some instances of how a text could be misread and result in diverted conclusions. Yet, the status of Benveniste in modern linguistics should not be overlooked because of the above observations. Still, Benveniste is important in many ways, especially the way he has distinguished between the semiotic mode and the semantic mode (Issacharoff). In a sense, Benveniste, illustrates the limitations of the closed system of Saussurean semiology and through introducing the semantic mode, proposes instead his discourse-oriented study (language in use) that should be considered as one of the sources of the theories later developed into discourse analysis studies. More importantly, Benveniste's argument that places the linguistic sign as a whole in an arbitrary relation to the referent (proclaiming the arbitrariness of the signification process instead of the sign) is a significant critique of Saussure that links Benveniste's reading to Jacques Derrida's.

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