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Review of Ferdinand de Saussure: Une science du langage pour une science de l'humain, by Jean-Paul Bronckart & Ecaterina Bulea-Bronckart

Citation for published version:

Joseph, JE 2022, 'Review of Ferdinand de Saussure: Une science du langage pour une science de l'humain, by Jean-Paul Bronckart & Ecaterina Bulea-Bronckart', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, pp. 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2110320>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/01434632.2022.2110320](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2022.2110320)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript version of the following article, accepted for publication in Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development:

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Ferdinand de Saussure: Une science du langage pour une science de l'humain

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Paris

Classiques Garnier

2022

Pp. 590

ISBN 978-2-406-12925-7 (pbk): €32

Anyone who reads *JMMD* is Saussure's intellectual descendant. So this means you. If you were taught that he inspired a structural linguistics which ended with Chomsky in 1957, and a more general structuralism which got 'post'-ed in the 1960s, you are not alone. But its purported demise is no longer widely accepted amongst scholars of the discipline's history. The lack of any clear break with the structuralist paradigm makes coming to grips with Saussure essential to understanding our trajectory to the present day, and into the foreseeable future.

If you are looking for an up-to-date overview of Saussurean linguistics and semiology, written from an original, interdisciplinary perspective by two people who have spent a lifetime preparing themselves to undertake the task, and many years in seeing it through, you may find this book worth reading. You will have to invest much time and patience, which you may or may not find to be wholly repaid, for reasons I shall explain.

The introduction is followed by an account of Saussure's work and career, from his primary schooling through to the three courses in general linguistics he gave at the University of Geneva between 1907 and 1911, and then on to how notes for and of those lectures were fashioned into the posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* of 1916. The authors' guiding principle is that, throughout his life, Saussure was following a single, unified vision of what a language is, or rather how it can be best grasped: by learning as many languages as possible, orally where possible, and then deducing from this empirical study what the essence of a language is in a universal sense.

In previous decades commentators wrote about an early and a late Saussure – the one a backward-looking historical linguist, the other a visionary semiotician – joined by a third 'nocturnal' Saussure whose research into anagrams in ancient poetry turned the work of his diurnal self or selves on its head. The publication in 2002 of his manuscript "Double essence du langage", believed to date from the early 1890s and showing the supposedly 'late' Saussure already in full bloom, helped to put paid to that illusion – though attentive readers of his *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*, dated 1879

though published shortly after his 21st birthday in 1878, could already see the continuity, which our authors do a good job of tracing.

The book's core consists of chapters devoted to Saussure's conception of *langue*, *langage*, *parole* and *discours*, the opposition of synchrony and diachrony, and semiology, as well as his investigations beyond the narrow limits of linguistics to encompass mediaeval Germanic legends and ancient anagrams. These chapters are not rigorously organised; the topics recur, sometimes with a stream-of-consciousness unpredictability which has its occasional charm, but also tests readers' patience. The frequent references to historical touchstones never wholly lack pertinence, but give the impression of being what happened to come to one or the other of the author's minds as they were writing, rather than the product of careful planning.

The final third of the book considers how Saussure positioned linguistics in relation to the adjacent academic fields of history, psychology and sociology, before a closing chapter which is, frankly, somewhat overblown. It repeats *humain* this and *humain* that so often as to reduce it to a verbal tic. It mainly serves to underscore how unpretentious a writer and teacher Saussure himself was in contrast.

A book such as this one can be evaluated in two ways, on its original contribution to our scientific understanding of Saussurean linguistics, and on its didactic value as a guide to what has been established, much of which remains contentious. Didactic aims are generally regarded as easier to achieve; yet the hardest work for an academic, at least in the humanities and social sciences, is to get complex ideas across to a wide readership, without either oversimplifying the ideas or patronising the audience. This is what Saussure managed to do in his courses in general linguistics. If the Bronckarts have not reached the same level of success, either scientifically or didactically, I admit that it is an unfairly high bar for a reviewer to set. Amongst the things to admire is their keen eye for the off-the-wall detail that will surprise and delight the adept, without, one hopes, unduly confusing the debutant.

Their desire to reduce the complexity of Saussure to a single-minded drive is a double-edged sword. The notion that all his thinking heads in a single direction is healthy insofar as it undoes the former implications of his intellectual schizophrenia – then becomes the cure that is worse than the disease, the *Gift* in both its English and German senses, an offering and a poison. The Bronckarts do to Saussure what he has been accused by so many of doing to language itself: reducing the complex whole to a containable system.

Actually they do not do this in a consistent way, since on the one hand they depict him as committed to empirical observation, whilst at the same time maintaining the standard view attributing to him ‘a postulate or an *a priori*’ that the *langue* must be approached as a whole system consisting of differential relationships (90-91). They say this is his one and only *a priori* postulate, but then go on to show that so much of his conception of language falls out from it that the limitation counts for little. They maintain moreover that the conception can already be seen in his first linguistic essay, written when he was 16 and later rejected by him as immature. I agree that the essay is more interesting than the mature Saussure would have us think, and that his vision of the language as a self-contained system of differences is effectively in place by the time of his 1879 *Mémoire* – but to see it in the earlier essay is too far a stretch.

Saussure’s public reticence was driven by his certainty that although, yes, there is a system, it accounts for only so much. The authors are right to underscore the gap between, on the one hand, the *langue* and, on the other, the *fait langagier total* – the total language-fact, embracing *langue*, *langage*, *parole* and *discours*, and serving as pilot science of a general semiology. Until he could integrate all this, he would not publish. And he perished. The book under review has not persuaded me that would have endorsed the use of his linguistics to establish a ‘science of the human’. He always characterised himself as a grammarian, and left psychology, philosophy, sociology and other disciplines contiguous to his own in the hands of their specialists. He was not given to delusions of grandeur.

The big book on Saussure which the authors have written has left me with the feeling that their goal was to write a big book on Saussure, then make it bigger by balancing on top of it their own take on a science of the human. It’s a precarious balance. Personally, I would have preferred a smaller, more tightly organised book, but I am probably not amongst the target audience. I am not sure who that audience is. But the book has no obvious competitor that is not outdated and, whatever I may see as its shortcomings, it achieves something noteworthy in each of its chapters.

These judgements aside, the authors have not been as well served as they deserve by their publisher. Classiques Garnier was established in 1896 specifically to issue definitive editions of classic literary texts, which ought to mean that original studies such as this one, which the company has been publishing only since 2009, are treated with great care in copy-editing and proofreading. Such, alas, is not the case. Some mistakes are self-correcting, as when we read that Saussure enrolled in the University of Leipzig in 1976, but most will not be evident

to the general reader. The errors, some of which are no doubt to be laid at the authors' door (their attributing Grimm's Law to Bopp being one of many), by no means ruin this ambitious book, but they may mar readerly confidence in its authority – all the more regrettable when the authors have long since earned a place in the top ranks of Saussure experts.

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