APPENDIX A

Brief Introduction to Saussure and Semiotics

Occasionally in history someone has an idea which alters dramatically the shape of what we think we know. Something like this happened when Copernicus took up the anomalies (or inconsistencies) with what we thought about the nature of the planets and the universe. Before Copernicus, we felt confident that the earth was fixed and unmoving, the center of the universe, and that the planets swirled about the earth beneath heaven, just as Ptolemy had said. Copernicus argued that the universe was actually heliocentric; it took a long time before this shift in the system of knowledge (called a paradigm) became widely accepted, and we finally came to smile at the "archaic" idea that the sun was once believed to circle around the earth. Similarly, we once were convinced that if one sailed too far one would literally fall off the surface of the earth, until explorers such as Christopher Columbus demonstrated otherwise. Freud's work, too, came drastically to affect our understanding of human behavior, by theorizing the existence of the subconscious mind as a force to influence behavior. These are but a few examples to introduce the idea that sometimes the work of a single individual "goes against the grain" of accepted belief/knowledge; this revolutionary work may nonetheless in time come to be accepted and even hailed as altering the very shape of the history of ideas. In ETS 141 we examine ideas about the system of language and other meaning-making systems that have profound implications for how we read and interpret.

In the early decades of this century, a linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure taught at the University of Geneva (Switzerland); much of Saussure's work went "against the grain" of what was then "known" about the nature of human language. His work came significantly to affect linguistics (the study of language), as well as anthropology, psychoanalysis, and literary theory; these fields, to name a few, have been shaped in important ways by Saussure's ideas about the nature of human language. In this course, you will be further exploring the implications of Saussure's work for how we read. Remember that Saussure was working with language. In the early part of the course we will be exploring whether or how Saussure's ideas about language might be applicable to other systems that make meaning, including systems we are familiar with that are verbal, such as our oral and written communications and expressions; we will also explore non-verbal meaning systems (such as "body language," for example), and your section of the course
may also explore visual meaning systems such as advertising, or art. Such a study of sign systems is called semiotics, and the assumption that there is such a structure is called "structuralism." Later sections of the course will explore the critiques offered of Saussure's ideas, and other theorists' explanations of various problems of meanings encoded in cultural practices. In the next several paragraphs, we'll explore some of the basic concepts of Saussurean analysis of language and their "transferability" to other systems of meaning.

Dress and driving are examples of systems where meaning is made in fairly orderly ways. In our culture we do not wear tuxedos or evening gowns to class, and similarly we recognize acceptable attire for a variety of formal or semi-formal occasions. Even the terms "formal" and "informal" suggest the presence of a system culturally agreed upon. Road signs, traffic signals, and keeping to the right, not passing on the double yellow line, are part of the system for driving. These are only two examples of the many systems, unobtrusively at work in our culture, much as Saussure saw such a system operating in language.

Let us begin by examining some important basic concepts. Saussure's thesis was that language is the instrument which enables human beings to achieve a rational comprehension of the world in which they live. Instead of seeing words as subordinate to our grasp of reality, Saussure saw our understanding of reality as depending essentially upon our social use of the verbal signs which constitute the language we use. Contrary to the current expression "mere words," an expression which seems to regard words as transparent and peripheral, Saussure saw language as central to human life. Human existence is linguistically articulated. We might go so far as to attribute to Saussure a modification of Descartes's famous argument (I think, therefore I am) by saying "I have language; therefore I am."

Though our existence is mediated through language, there is no necessary or "natural" connection between the signal and the idea, or what Saussure called the signifier and the signified. Plato had probably first voiced this idea, but Saussure is credited with developing it. Consider names. Names are themselves signifiers and do not exactly equal the person. Or think of a simple word, such as "mother" in different languages you know: moder, Danish; mutter, German; mere, French; mater, Latin; uma, Urdu. You see, the connection between sounds and meanings is entirely arbitrary, culturally produced.

Saussure (through his translator) put it this way:

Psychologically our thought--apart from its expression in words--is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always
agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language. . . . Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound. . . . Linguistics then works in the borderland where the elements of sound and thought combine; their combination produces a form, not a substance.

(Course in General Linguistics, pp. 111-12)

The impossibility of cutting a sheet of paper without simultaneously cutting both sides of it symbolizes for Saussure the intrinsic inseparability of the phonetic and conceptual facets of language. Again, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is entirely arbitrary, produced in culture. But it is a structure, and the structure is a system of differences, to be studied independently of what it or its parts might refer to outside the system, or the code, or the convention, that determines meaning. Let's start with an example from the world of English words. In English the difference between sounds determines their meaning. Thus dip and tip differ from each other by a very small (but significant) feature, the voicing of the initial consonant. That single feature in English is sufficient to establish the two sounds as separate phonemes, and sufficient for native speakers of the language to know the difference between the two words. You can grasp this fundamental concept by considering other pairs of words whose difference in meaning depends upon a single phonetic trait (a sound, not a letter): bad/bat, sin/sing, ether/either, glue/clue. The "meaning" of either word in the paired set is less to the point here, than that the difference in sound signals the difference in meaning. We do the same thing with other systems of meaning. Grant, if you will for the sake of example, that what we wear and how we wear it--clothing, or fashion--is such a system of meaning. Any single item of clothing "signifies" only in relation to its "point of difference" from another item, and only within the system it is "placed in." A shirt, for example, is simply an item presumably intended to cover the upper body--but look what happens to a "simple" shirt when it is worn on a body otherwise naked!

If you can recognize that a shirt "means" as an item of clothing and according to the rest of the items of clothing it appears with, you can grasp an important implication. That is, here a single organizational structure (clothing) accounts simultaneously for both the signal (shirt) and the concept (upperclass male, for example), or as Saussure put it, the signifier and the signified; put more broadly, human speech is signifier and human reason is signified. This underlying whole system, or structure, Saussure called langue, and he proposed that the study of langue be the primary task of linguistics. This
langue makes possible an actual specific speech act, but is not to be confused with the specific utterance, or "speech," or linguistic performance, which he called parole. The langue is the total system in general, whereas parole is any particular instance or usage within it. We can recognize that in the langue of English are many paroles, some of them regional varieties, some socioeconomic; the langue of "English" allows you to recognize my Texan parole as English, even if it is not a familiar dialect. Children's jump rope rhymes, for another example, actually turn out to have a langue or underlying system, though specific groups of children playing jump rope have their specific paroles. And, in the langue of clothing many paroles are possible to cover the body, just as in the English language, many dialects make diverse, though still "understandable," the actual sounds of English. Parole, then, is any specific instance of speech--jargon, slang--just as in the English language there are many possible varieties of discourse (dialect, slang, technical jargon, or any individual's speech act, to name a few). (Discourse here means any speech act, or language as it actually gets used in a given time and place by persons with varying "agendas," for varying purposes both acknowledged and unacknowledged. The word allows us to account for the "interestedness" of language in its actual uses).

Saussure's paper-cutting example illustrates the concept of the separability yet relatedness of two planes, in that, for example, the linguistic sign is defined purely by its form, which has two exactly complementary facets, or "opposite sides." The Saussurean terms for these two facets of the sign are signifier and signified. Saussure gave the example of tree (see diagram below); he noted that the relation between signifier and signified is completely arbitrary.

Whether a visual image or a spelling, the "concept" of "treeness" is called by different terms in different languages (p. 65); in the diagram Saussure uses arbor (the French word for tree) to stand for the potentially varied sound-images in different languages.

Every langue is a complete semiotic system of such signs. There is no necessary, natural, or inevitable connection between signifiers and signified. The signifier, moreover, is completely arbitrary. We could, in our language, call dog something else (the French word is chien, for example). Anyone who knows something about the long history of magic might recognize that Saussure's work went "against the grain" of a long-standing attempt to find a motivated relationship between language and meaning (think about the "power" of abracadabra, for example). Much the same is true within literary studies, as for example the claim for onomatopoeia; as Saussure pointed out, French dogs go "ouaoua" rather than "bow-wow"! As Saussure says, "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image" (pg. 66).

Remember that Saussure claims that in language meaning is produced differentially. A word is made of phonemes, or phonic signifiers (note the difference in meaning between ski and sky or dog and dock); these signifiers do not signify the concept, but mark the absence of other signifiers. (May I borrow my colleague Bill Reading's humorous example here, since Saussure was Swiss? The concept is "negative space"; Swiss cheese may be said to be defined by "the absence of cheese," or the holes. The whole cheese is defined by the holes in the cheese.) Differentiation is the fundamental principle by which signs mean. In Saussure's words,

Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between
which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. . . . (p. 120)

Saussure pointed out that the linguistic sign "means" along two additional planes, one of which is the relationship a given sign has with others around it (the syntagmatic). The word "rat" means differently in The rat ate the cat than in "It's not very nice to rat on your friends," Ivan said. Or consider the bumper sticker "I support the right to arm bears," a humorous variant of the original "I support the right to bear arms." Position in the string is the difference. But "bear" in the first bumper sticker example also belongs to a paradigm, in which also "belong" other words such as "Smokey," "ursa," "Yogi," "Papa Bear," "grizzly" to name a few (and not even to include figurative substitutions). To go back to our clothing example, "shirt" belongs to a paradigm that might also include "turtleneck," "T-shirt," "sweater"; "shirt" means something different in "he lost his shirt" than in "he wears his shirt backwards" (actually its meaning is ambiguous in the first sentence). Note that we need to "know" both the syntagm and the paradigm in order to read.

As evidence that both syntagm and paradigm are implicated in "meaning," consider that "he lost his turtleneck" does not work for the figurative reading of "he lost his shirt," whereas "he wears his sweater backwards" works acceptably for this male's idiosyncrasy of dress.

Finally, Saussure noted that one can study language at a point in time (synchronously) or as it changes through time (diachronically). This concept is easy enough to grasp for those who have read a play by Shakespeare; it is clear to the speaker/reader of modern English that our language has changed (diachronically) since Shakespeare's day. Or consider any of hundreds of words whose meaning has shifted quite dramatically (gay, fond, hussy, to cite but three). Compare these diachronic changes with the variations in meaning a word can have depending upon its synchronic context, and you have the opposition between diachronic and synchronic. Other systems of making meaning may also have the synchronic/diachronic dimension--consider the use of lace to decorate clothing. Today, it belongs to the paradigm of the female dress code, but it has not always been so identified. What about the "sign" of the earring--has it changed diachronically? Does its meaning vary synchronically?

Linguistics was to be just one branch of a more general science of signs, which Saussure proposed to call semiology, or semiotics. Each branch would need a theory of the signs it dealt with; for linguistics, what was needed was a theory of the linguistic sign. Saussure's work provides such a theory. Unfortunately, the Course in General Linguistics was not published in his lifetime, nor did he even leave behind its manuscript. Instead, what we have of his work is a reconstruction by his students from their own lecture notes from the course he gave at the University of Geneva between 1906 and 1911. Since its appearance, there has been much discussion about the implications of Saussure's work, and its implications both for linguistics and for other disciplines that have been influenced by it. Saussure's work constituted one theory, and a powerful one at that, judging by its impact on post-Saussurean (post-structural) work in other fields, including literary study; literary theory is one field in which inquiry and debate have been very actively at work to construct a theory to explain reading and interpretation.

In this brief introduction we have looked at Saussure's theory of language and at examples from
English and the non-verbal sign system of dress. In English 141 you will be extending this semiotic analysis to other systems, including the literary. The importance of Saussure's primarily synchronic analysis for the contemporary study of the sign rests in his separation of the signifier from the signified, his insistence on the differential basis of linguistic meaning, and his analysis of the nature of relational meaning. But we should also acknowledge that Saussure's model did not go far enough to explain fully how signs function as cultural units.

One difficulty is that because Saussure emphasized spoken language, his analysis did not take sufficiently into account **discourse**, which we have referred to as the "situatedness of language," and which may be written, spoken, or "signed." In pointing to the underlying system of language (**langue**) Saussure seemed to suggest that there is a single, fixed system with material existence. Actually, the relationship between the "situations" of language and the "underlying system" is more complicated than that. My colleagues Linda Shires and Steven Cohan explain

> it is tempting to conclude from Saussure's model that language is an unchanging, universal system governed by unalterable rules but, in actual practice, those rules do not always apply. A language system does not prescribe right and wrong uses for discourse so much as it establishes possible conditions of signification. In sum, a sign system does not "exist" materially as language in the way that discourse does. The system is merely an abstraction, a paradigmatic reconstruction of the principles governing actual language use, and, thus, marking out possibilities of meaning for discourse (p. 17).

In my own words, all sign systems are not "natural" but "constructed"; therefore, it follows that language systems and their discourses are never singular, universal, or timeless, but rather plural, culture-specific, and historical. Because the relation between signifier and signified is not only arbitrary, but unstable, signs can disrupt as well as facilitate. We saw a simple example when we considered the effect of wearing **only** a shirt. Other examples abound, as any time we use a word in a different or unusual sense or setting. This observation has profound implications for how we read, since it means among other things that "we will never have finished reading, and how we read makes a difference." (Readings)

In ETS 141, teachers and students begin with Saussure's ideas, and work beyond them--clarifying, connecting, extending--in the varied texts of the course to explore what is at stake when we "read" and "interpret," moving from "language" to "discourse."

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**References**

