

SOME COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN 'LANGUE' AND 'LANGAGE'

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ABSTRACT: Modern French has two words: *langue* and *langage* when English has only one: *language*, originally a loanword from Old French. The article investigates when and how French gradually used two words to distinguish the concept of a particular language (*langue*) and that of speech ability (*langage*). This split started around 1600 and was permanently established around 1800.

KEYWORDS: Language; Structuralism; de Saussure.

1. ABOUT THE ENGLISH WORD 'LANGUAGE'

The present article originates in my personal realization that English only has one word: *language* whereas French has two words: *langue* and *langage* to describe linguistic activity, behavior, competence or faculty², in spite of the quite obvious historical fact that the English word is a loanword from (Old) French³. So I set about looking for the reasons why the difference exists and what particular theoretical features it may entail. English somehow misses a word and it is interesting to investigate the causes and some potential consequences of that lexical want.

It is worth noting that, following the impulse of Old French, several modern Romance languages display a similar difference between *langue*⁴ and *langage*⁵. The word *langue* is the

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² Depending on the theoretical preferences of authors.

³ The English word begins to be attested in the time bracket: 1250-1300. Middle English *language* < Old French *langua(i)ge* < an unattested Gallo-Roman word **linguāticum* derived from Latin *lingua* 'tongue'. The modern English pronunciation with [gw] is most probably a graphic hypercorrection. This feature cannot be inherited from Old French *langua(i)ge*. Cf. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/language>.

⁴ Whence Italian *lingua*, Spanish *lengua*, Portuguese *língua*, Old Provençal *lenga* and Romanian *limba* (with a particular phonetic development).

direct continuation of Latin *lingua* ‘tongue’ whereas *langage* is a derivative of Gallo-Roman origin **linguāticum*⁶. The Spanish and Portuguese words *lenguaje* and *linguagem*⁷, contrasting with *lingua* and *língua* respectively, are usually ascribed to come from Old Provençal *leng(u)atge* in a way or another. The Italian word *linguaggio*⁸ is also supposed to be descended from Old Provençal⁹. A conspicuous peculiarity of modern western Romance languages is that they have a distinction between *langage* defined as ‘the ability (or faculty) observed among all human beings to communicate by means of languages’¹⁰ and *langue* defined as ‘any system of vocal signs dually articulated and specific to a given human community’¹¹. English has only one word to express both meanings, as observed before and it is interesting to determine whether this situation may become troublesome.

2. THE SITUATION IN LATIN

In Latin the word *lingua* was used to mean¹²:

- the anatomical organ: *linguam exserere* ‘to thrust out the tongue, in token of derision or contempt’,
- the tongue or language of a people: *qui ipsorum lingua Celtae, nostra Galli, appellantur* ‘who are called Celts in their own language and Gauls in our own’,
- a dialect, idiom, mode of speech: *philosophorum lingua* ‘the language of philosophers’,
- the voice, note, song, bark, etc. (of animals): *linguae volucrum* ‘the songs of birds’.

The notion of ‘faculty or ability to speak’ was expressed with the word *oratio*¹³, which also means a ‘speech, utterance’ or a ‘way of speaking, manner or style of speech’, and also

⁵ It should nevertheless be noted that Romanian has *limba* for both words. The distinction is a western Romance and (therefore) late innovation dating back to the Middle-Ages.

⁶ It can be noted that the Old French word *langua(i)ge* was either of feminine or masculine gender, a feature that is reflected in Spanish *lenguaje* (masc.) and Portuguese *linguagem* (fem.). The feminine gender reflects the neuter plural *linguātica* reinterpreted as a feminine singular as in often the case with neuter nouns in Romance.

⁷ Cf. for Spanish http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO_BUS=3&LEMA= and for Portuguese <http://www.infopedia.pt/lingua-portuguesa/linguagem>.

⁸ <http://www.etimo.it/?term=linguaggio> according to the etymological dictionary of Ottorino Pianigiani (1907).

⁹ A southern French dialect which used to have a powerful cultural influence in the early Middle-Ages, before Parisian French gradually gained precedence. About a hundred modern French words can be traced back to Old Provençal.

¹⁰ Mounin (1995:196): “Langage: L’aptitude observée chez tous les hommes à communiquer au moyen des langues.”

¹¹ Mounin (1995:196): “Langue: Tout système de signes vocaux doublement articulés, propre à une communauté humaine donnée.”

¹² Cf. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu> from which the examples are taken.

the ‘language of any people or nation’. It can be added that *sermo* ‘discussion, conversation’ may also mean ‘language’¹⁴. The Latin word *lingua* had several derivatives, some of which are attested in Old French:

- *linguatus* ‘having a tongue, eloquent’,
- *linguax* ‘loquacious, talkative’,
- *lingulaca* ‘gossip’,
- *lingulatus* ‘tongue-shaped’,
- *lingulus, linguosus* ‘talkative’. Cf. Old French *lango(u)s*.

3. THE SITUATION IN OLD FRENCH

In Old French, the word *langue*, in spite of its direct cognacy with Latin *lingua*, very seldom¹⁵ describes the *tongue* in the linguistic meaning:

- used anatomically: *Renart li a la langue traité Bien demi pies fors de la gueule* (Verse 1206) ‘Renart has drawn his tongue out of his mouth about half a foot long’,
- a nation or country: *la langue tyoise*¹⁶ ‘the German people’ (attested in 1336). This sense is still preserved in the so-called “langues” of the Knights of Malta, where *langue* is to be understood as a province or country. This surprising meaning is not far from being a “faux-ami” between Old French and Modern French. The word *langue* is sometimes written *lange*: *Après envoiera messages par les terres, par les langes* ‘Afterward he will send messages in all countries and nations’.

Toward Middle French, the modern meaning is increasingly frequent:

- *Le latin estoit la langue première de l’Italien*. ‘Latin used to be the language first spoken by Italian people’. (XVIth century)

In the meaning of a particular ‘language’, the word *langage* is standard in Old French:

¹³ Cf. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>: ‘Speech, the power or faculty of speech, the habit or use of language’.

¹⁴ Under the influence of Christianity, both *sermo* and *oratio* have acquired specialized meanings in relationship with mass and Catholic religious practices.

¹⁵ Cf. Greimas (1994:333): ‘langage parlé ou écrit (rare en anc. fr.)’. The *ATLFI* nevertheless indicates that this meaning is attested as early as the end of the Xth century. Cf. <http://atilf.atilf.fr/>.

¹⁶ A peculiar rendition of German *deutsch*.

- a language specific to a people or country: *Mis languages est bons, car en France fui nez* ‘My language is good, for in France was born’. The word can be of feminine gender: *il les welcume [sic] en sa [sic] langage* ‘He welcomes them in their language’¹⁷.
- words: *Et leur disoit ces langages en riant* ‘And was telling them these words laughing’,
- a means to communicate: *langage (d’oisiaus)* ‘language of birds’.

The words *langue* and *langage* had a significant number of derivatives:

- *langag(i)er* ‘to say’: *Ensi et autres semblables paroles langagoient li Englès* ‘Thus and other similar words were the English saying’,
- *langageur* ‘braggart’: *yvrongne et grant langageur* ‘drunkard and great braggart’,
- *langart* ‘talkative’: *fort langart et accoustumé de parler* ‘much talkative and used to speaking (a lot)’,
- *lango(u)s* ‘talkative’: *La rainne qui est tant lengouse contre le buief fut enviouse* ‘The frog which is so much talkative got jealous of the ox’,
- *langueter* ‘to talk’, *il fust bon avocat en court, car il scet trop bien langueter* ‘He was a good lawyer at court for he knows too well how to speak’,
- *langoyer, langayer* ‘to examine pigs’ tongues to know if they are sick’.

Sometimes the word *latin* was used as a synonym of *langage*, even when referring to animals:

“Ce fu el tems qu’arbres florissent, [Then came the time when trees blossom]
 Foillent boscages et près verdissent, [bushes get leaves and pastures are green]
 Que cist oisel en lor latin, [when the birds in their language (Latin!)]
 Dolcement chantent al matin.” [softly sing in the morning.]

Rather unsurprising, the lexical situation of Old French is that inherited by the English language from the Anglo-Normans. This means that the split between *langue* and *langage* happened later on. This is what we are now going to determine in the next paragraphs.

¹⁷ It is hard to figure out whether there is not some additional irony in the use of the feminine gender in that sentence, as foreigners are well-known to have difficulties with grammatical genders.

4. THE SITUATION IN MIDDLE FRENCH

The semantic shift between the two words *langue* and *langage* is eloquently and remarkably exemplified by the title itself of the *Dictionnaire historique de l'ancien langage françois ou glossaire de la langue françoise* by Jean-Baptiste de la Curne de Sainte-Palaye in 1882: 'Historical dictionary of the ancient French *langage* [sic] or glossary of the French *langue* [sic]', which indicates that the word *langage* is clearly old-fashioned and that the regular word has become *langue*. During the XVth century it is commonplace to encounter *langaige allemant* 'German language' or *langaige tuscan* 'Italian language'. But afterwards during the XVIth century *langa(i)ge* is gradually replaced by *langue*. Nicot (1606) mentions in his *Thresor de la langue françoise* the phrase *langue maternelle* 'mother tongue' but there is no ***langage maternel*. Later on, Lacombe (1765) glosses *langa(i)ge* with *langue* but the reverse is not true. The first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* published in 1694 indicates that both *langue* and *langage* mean 'idiome dont se sert une nation', but the sheer number of examples shows that that *langage* is already losing ground when compared to *langue*. Jean-François Féraud in 1788 explains in his *Dictionnaire* [sic]¹⁸ *critique de la langue françoise*:

"Quand on veut marquer seulement la manière de s'exprimer d'un pays, on se sert de langue plutôt que de langage. La langue maternelle, la langue française, anglaise, etc. et non pas le langage maternel, le langage français, etc. Ainsi l'on dit, bien parler sa langue, et non pas bien parler son langage."¹⁹

Parallel to the development of *langue* as the 'idiom of the particular nation', the word *langage* tends to refer either to a (unusual) way of expressing one's thoughts or feelings or to the general ability of mankind to do so, as under the pen of Beauzée (1767, t1 XVI-XVII):

"J'ai trouvé partout les mêmes principes généraux, la même universalité dans les lois communes du Langage [...] en conséquence, tous les peuples de la terre, malgré la diversité des idiomes, parlent absolument tous le même Langage, sans anomalie et sans exception."²⁰

¹⁸ With only one -n- at *dictionnaire*...

¹⁹ "When one wants to talk about the way a country speaks one resorts to *langue* rather than *langage*. The mother *langue*, the French *langue*, the English *langue*, etc. not the mother *langage*, the French *langage*, etc. And one says: to speak well one's *langue* and not to speak well one's *langage*."

²⁰ "I found everywhere the same general principles, the same universality in the common laws of (the) *Langage* [...] and consequently, all the people of the earth, in spite of the diversity of idioms, speak absolutely the same *Langage*, without defect nor exception." It can be noted that this sentence can hardly receive a straightforward translation into English precisely because English has only one word.

The gradual displacement of *langage* by *langue* thus started around 1600 and was definitely carried out before 1800. This is the situation that has been existing in French for more than two centuries down to the present.

5. TRANSLATING FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE INTO ENGLISH

Being a native speaker of French (from Geneva in Switzerland), Ferdinand de Saussure inherited the cultural distinction between *langue* and *langage*.

“Il faut se placer de prime abord sur le terrain de la langue et la prendre pour norme de toutes les autres manifestations du langage. En effet parmi tant de dualités, la langue seule paraît être susceptible d'une définition autonome et fournit un point d'appui satisfaisant pour l'esprit.

Mais qu'est-ce que la langue ? Pour nous elle ne se confond pas avec le langage ; elle n'en est qu'une partie déterminée, essentielle, il est vrai. C'est à la fois un produit social de la faculté du langage et un ensemble de conventions nécessaires, adoptées par le corps social pour permettre l'exercice de cette faculté chez les individus. [...]

La langue, au contraire, est un tout en soi et un principe de classification. Dès que nous lui donnons la première place parmi les faits de langage, nous introduisons un ordre naturel dans un ensemble qui ne se prête à aucune autre classification.”²¹

This excerpt from Saussure states the clear difference that he makes between *langue* and *langage*. In his Translator's Introduction (1986: XIII-XIV), the translator of Saussure's *CLG* seems to downplay the issue of rendering the meaning and the difference in English:

“Surprisingly few have seen that it is not at all necessary to make heavy weather of the distinction between *langue* and *langage* provided one respects the important semantic difference in English between *language* with and without an article.”

And in the following pages (1986: XV-XVI):

“Some of the central problems of interpretation of the *Cours de linguistique générale* hinge upon the fact that the word *langue* seems to be used in a variety of ways. [...] How to translate *langue* is consequently a question which cannot be kept separate from one's analysis of the theorising underlying the *Cours* as published.

[...]

An attempt has been made to indicate the full range of implications associated with the term *langue* by using different renderings in different contexts. While *the language* or *a language* are often perfectly adequate [sic] English translations, there are also many instances where expressions such as *linguistic structure* or *linguistic system* bring out much more clearly in English the particular point that is being made.”

²¹ (CLG: 25).

The short excerpt above, where *langue* and *langage* appear simultaneously and which is luminous to a French speaker, has been “translated” into English as follows:

“The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure [sic] as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it. Indeed, amid so many dualities, linguistic structure [sic] seems to be the one thing that is independently definable and provides something that our minds can satisfactorily grasp.

What, then, is linguistic structure [sic]? It is not, in our opinion, the same thing as language. Linguistic structure is only one part of language, even though it is an essential part. The structure of a language [sic] is a social product of our language faculty. At the same time, it is also a body of conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty. [...]

A language as a structured system [sic], on the contrary, is both a self contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give linguistic structure pride of place among the facts of language, we introduce a natural order into an aggregate which lends itself to no other classification.”²²

In my humble opinion, it is quite clear that this tentative “translation” fails by a large margin to convey the original meaning. The replacement of the concept of *langue* by that of *linguistic structure* is extremely reductive and nearly a betrayal of Saussure's thinking and wording. As explained in the introduction of the English version of Saussure (2006: XX): “*Langue* is both a mental and a social reality, made up of elements which are values defined by difference, or by being in opposition with other units.” Moreover, it can be noted that Saussure never used the word *structure*: “Saussure himself used the term ‘system’, not ‘structure’, in both linguistics and semiology”, as aptly noted in Saussure (2006:XXVIII). A feature of Saussure's thinking about *langue* is indeed its polymorphic nature: social institution, sociolinguistic norm, particular instantiation of the faculty of language, underlying potentiality which gets actualized in speech, historical product which gets constantly rearranged synchronically. To translate *langue* as *linguistic structure* is a kind of hyper-structuralist interpretation of the word which is alien to Saussure's approach. In fact, when complaining that: “Some of the central problems of interpretation of the *Cours de linguistique générale* hinge upon the fact that the word *langue* seems to be used in a variety of ways”, the translator is indeed stating the obvious: there is a lexical hole in English. But this does not seem to lead to the realization that the translation is going to be defective and to dismantle the polymorphic unity that is conveyed by one word: *langue*.

²² Cf. Saussure (1965: 25).

5. CONCLUSION

One is left to wonder whether Saussure's thought can be translated in English at all²³. It is quite fascinating (not to say laughable) that Chomsky once considered Saussure 'naive'²⁴ when the language of the former does not even permit to translate the latter properly and adequately. Anyway, as observed in Saussure (2006:XXVIII):

“Saussure continues to be considered as one of the founding fathers of modern linguistics. Above all, the *Cours de linguistique générale* is one of the canonical texts of twentieth century thought, having become one of the key works for a movement that became known as structuralism. [...] A generation of thinkers in a range of disciplines recognize their heavy debt to the *Cours*: Lévi-Strauss for anthropology, Barthes for literary criticism and cultural analysis, Althusser for marxist political thought, Lacan for psychoanalysis, to name but a few. [...] Due to Saussure, linguistics became for many thinkers the *science-pilote*, the model for all semiological systems within the humanities and social sciences.”

Time will tell what is left of Chomskyan linguistics in one century. We already know that the influence of Saussure on linguistics and beyond has managed to be deep and lasting.

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²³ Saussure (1965: 423-5) discusses the possibilities and hardships for translating the Saussurean triptic: *langue*, *langage* and *parole* in the different European languages. Quite obviously there is hardly any problem in Romance languages.

²⁴ Cf. Saussure (1986: XIV).

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ABSTRACT: Modern French has two words: *langue* and *langage* when English has only one: *language*, originally a loanword from Old French. The article investigates when and how French gradually used two words to distinguish the concept of a particular language (*langue*) and that of speech ability (*langage*). This split started around 1600 and was permanently established around 1800.

KEYWORDS: Language; Structuralism; de Saussure.

RESUMO: o francês moderno tem duas palavras: *langue* e *langage* quando o inglês tem apenas uma: *linguagem*, originalmente um empréstimo do francês arcaico. O artigo investiga como e quando o francês gradualmente utilizou duas palavras para distinguir o conceito de uma determinada língua (*langue*) e que a capacidade de fala (*langage*). Essa divisão começou por volta de 1600 e foi definitivamente estabelecida em torno de 1800.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Língua; Estruturalismo; Saussure.

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