

On saussure's linguistic theory essay

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Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is one of the most famous and influencing linguists in the last century. His linguistic theory of regarding language as a synchronic and static sign system has turned the historical trend of linguistics and opened up a new pattern of modern linguistics, thus makes linguistics get great achievement in the 20th century. His work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) that comes from the notes of his lessons collected by his students is one of classical works and is called "Bible" of linguistics. It has caused extensive response with its novel and unique thought, and Saussure is praised as "Father of Modern Linguistics" too.

Saussure is an epoch-making giant in the development history of linguistics. His new theory, new principle, and new concept have become the foundation stone for the setting-up of the modern linguistic mansion. 2. *Langue and parole* Saussure begins with the two basic expressive forms of language, namely *langue* and *parole* to examine the whole language phenomenon first. He thinks that speech activity is various, and its nature is complicated. It covers several fields of physics, physiology and psychology at the same time, and it still belongs to personal field and social field. We are not able to include it in any category of humane fact, because we do not know how to understand its entia (Saussure, 1980, p.

30). He points out that in separating *langue* from *parole* we are at the same time separating: (1) what is social from what is individual; and (2) what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental (Saussure, 1980, p. 5).

This is the first fork in Saussure's thoughts of language: the speech activity is divided into the *langue* and *parole*. Saussure says that, "No doubt, these two targets are closely linked and both as the prerequisite. To let *parole* understood by people and make all its effects, there must be languages. But to establish language, there must be speech" (Saussure, 1980, p. 41). "The speech activity has personal aspects and social ones; one cannot exist without the other" (Saussure, 1980, p. 9).

We can conclude from the statements above, that Saussure thinks *langue* and *parole* are inseparable, and closely linked. Without *langue*, *parole* loses the unified system, and cannot be understood, its result is unable to be verified. Without *parole*, *langue* will not be set up either. Therefore, it is easy to tell that, Saussure's distinguishing of *langue* and *parole* is on the purpose of explaining the differences between the two, namely emphasizes the systematization of language. However, at the same time Saussure says that "Research of speech activity includes two parts, one is primary, which is social essentially, and does not take the personal speech as research target...Another is less important, that it takes the personal part of speech activity, namely *parole*, including articulation as research target..." (Saussure, 1980, p. 41). "It is an illusion to joint *langue* and *parole* together with the same view.

The whole of the speech activity is unable to know, because it is not homogeneous" (Saussure, 1980, p. 42). This kind of seemingly self-contradictory view is really very apt to make people produce doubt and misunderstanding on the relation between *langue* and *parole*. The meaning of Saussure is that language is systematic and can be studied because of the

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disorder of inner link between langue and parole, but parole cannot be studied systematically, and therefore is cast out. And then people criticize Saussure for distinguishing langue and parole on the purpose of cutting off the connection between them and regarding them as irrelevant to each other.

In fact, Saussure does not think there are impassable gaps between langue and parole. For Saussure, langue and parole are two unified aspects in speech activity. He also thinks that, " We must be clear: we believe linguistics...is a science that tries to converge two thoroughly different things into a whole, it emphasizes that they form a research object". It is obvious that Saussure not only finds the antithesis of langue and parole, but also finds the connection and unity between them while describing the relation between them.

3. Saussure's theory of linguistic sign. As the founder of modern semiology, Saussure proposes and establishes the discipline of semiology formally for the first time. The influences of Saussure's theory of semiology on later age are known by everyone, but the disadvantages are seldom mentioned. How to understand the core connotation of the theory correctly is the primary subject of semiology. The contribution of Saussure's theory of semiology lies in the following several aspects. First, it proposes the discipline of semiology formally for the first time. Second, it points out the essential distinction between linguistic sign and non-linguistic sign clearly.

Third, it has carried out systematic analysis on the characteristics of the linguistic sign. The research of sign is not initiated by Saussure. As everyone

knows, in the west in ancient Greek period, and in China in the early period of Qin, there was already large amount of dispute about the phenomenon of signal. The target of the dispute is primarily linguistic sign, and the essence of the dispute is mainly about the relation between linguistic sign and the object it represents.

Namely whether there is natural relation of different extents between linguistic sign and the signified. Namely whether the forming of words and phrases can be proved, and whether the origin cause of linguistic sign's formation can be found from the targets represented. Different answers to this question have formed the "natural theory" and "conventional theory" of ancient Greek, and "nominalism" and "realism" correspondingly in China. Such disputes are not yet settled down today. Saussure's semiology is not only review and examination on the basis of the related disputes in the history of language.

The more important thing is that he realizes the human society has used numerous relatively self-sustaining form systems consciously or unconsciously while expressing and transmitting the achievement of understanding about surrounding environment and oneself. These systems have very obvious generality that they can replace, represent, and reflect the objects on different extents (LU, 2001, p. 101). To Saussure, language is an organic sign system. In this system, linguistic sign has two aspects of a form (signifier) and content (signified). It is arbitrary to use a sign to represent any content, and it is determined by the society. However, when it is fixed, it has compelling force, and any individual cannot change it optionally.

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The debt relation of linguistic sign is not important, and the more important thing is the difference and relation between it and other signs. That is to say, the value of linguistic sign is not decided by its physical property but the relation between signs. On the basis of this theory, Saussure thinks that linguistics face the second fork on the road, the language in speech activity can be divided into synchronic and diachronic. Thus, Saussure advocates distinguishing two kinds of linguistics: synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics, and the synchronic linguistics are more important. On this foundation, Saussure explains syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations emphatically. He thinks that in the organization of language, all key elements are based on "relation", and this kind of relation is nothing more than two kinds, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations.

Syntagmatic relation is a relation between one item and others in a sequence; and paradigmatic relation is a relation that items can substitute for each other without violating syntactic rules. These two relations are the basic relations in language system, and are our keys to observe, analyze, and sum up the intricate language phenomenon. While setting up new language theory, Saussure points out that the question of language is mainly the question of semiology, and all of our demonstration should obtain meaning from this important fact. To know the essence of language, we must know what common qualities it has with other congener sign system first. He thinks that we can imagine there is one science studying the life of sign in social life; we call it semiology.... Because this science does not exist, we cannot say what it will be like, but it has the right of existence, and its position is confirmed in advance.

Linguistics is just a part of this general science... (HU, 2001, p. 105). The theory of semiology proposed by Saussure is limited, but it is very important to the research later. In addition, although his definitions of sign, signifier, and signified are made for linguistic sign, they inspire all of the modern semiologists. Therefore, people praise Saussure as the founder of semiology (Jl, 1994, p. 9).

4. Conclusion Saussure's contribution to linguistics is indelible. However, his theory of language has limitation, too. Since the coming out of Course in general linguistics, Saussure's views have been accepted by the linguistic circle generally. According to his opinion, linguists throw into the synchronic static research and description of the construction relation in the language system, in order to achieve the "scientific" aim of "research language according to and for language". In the language world of Saussure, what he values is structure, form, rule, generality, mode, and system, which makes the language research step on a road that repels humane factors, and departs from the social environment and the people who use languages. If this way is convenient to establish an accurate and "scientific" linguistics, it makes distance with the active, abundant, and changeable human speeches. Linguistics may become "lean" and "sere". Certainly, we should not deny Saussure's theory from this angle totally. As a kind of "scientific linguistics", Saussure's view should have its certain historical position, and it has finished corresponding historical mission. What we really need to do is that we should not regard Saussure's linguistic mode as the only possible existence.

We should break the traditional way of observing language phenomenon, and examine them from different sides and different points of view, so that to understand language more roundly, and establish more scientific linguistic view, instead of sticking to one kind of understanding (JI, 1994, p. 0). In the field of linguistic research today, the research object has already expanded from Saussure's structure analysis to social linguistics, speech linguistics, practical linguistics, etc, which brings new vigor to the development of world linguistics. This development trend will make linguistics emit more magnificent and brilliant rays in humane scientific research.