CHAPTER ONE

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE: BEGINNINGS

I

This chapter aims to study the word-thing relationship as expounded in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1959). The nature of Saussure's probe into language leads to both simplicity as well as complexity. Rather than the answers, it is the questions he addresses to language that boggles the Saussure reader/scholar. He does not so much describe how language works as wonder what, in language, guarantees that it *will* work. This chapter intends a closer reading of the *Course*, thereby exploring the doubtful meaning, ambiguities, if any, in the text. Saussure's ideas hinge upon a few key concepts—*langue* (and the synchronic approach to linguistics it reflects), the dual nature of the sign, and value— all of which seem to contribute to judging and problematizing the 'distance' between the word and the thing.

The hypotheses governing this chapter are:(i) there lies an incompatibility between the exigency for a fixed meaning of words, essential to communication, and the contamination of meaning due to the interaction of each unit with others around it, and (ii) meaning in language operates as an aspect of social investment as well as social investiture. The social investment in language in fact halts the endless process of signification.

The assumption informing this work is that any theory of language is based on a definition of sign and its relation to other signs. The treatment of meaning and its related questions have been essentially the working out of what is already implied in the basic definition of a sign. The second assumption guiding this study is that if any sign has meaning there must be an institution or a system that allows it to have meaning.

Meaning or truth which we might be inclined to take as given are products of semiotic systems — signification is more than a process of representation—it is one of articulation, determined and defined by the norms of usage laid down by social institutions. Something has to resist semantic permutation and contamination so as to bring about some kind of co-ordination between the word and the thing at a particular point in time. It is therefore the pressure generated by the societal norms that determines the gap between the word and the thing.

While Saussure's *Course* provides classic assertions of logocentric positions, it also offers instances of principles that undo or subvert them. Thus closer attention to the

Course indicates even the beginnings of certain contradictions in Saussure's argument. Given the acknowledgement that these aspects may be inevitable in a reconstructed text, it also needs to be examined as to whether these 'confusions' may be symptoms of a 'miscarriage' of the Saussurean line of thinking. The purpose of this chapter is basically to propose the latter point.

Bloomfield's review of the second edition of Saussure's *Course* in 1924 is an important document not only in the history of American linguistics but in the entire school of Saussurean linguistics..Of scourse, two years earlier in a review of Edward Sapir's much acclaimed book, *Language* (1921), Bloomfield pointed to Saussure's *Course* as a book "which gives a theoretic foundation to the newer trend of linguistic study" in which "one critical point" was that linguists were "coming to believe that restriction to historical work is unreasonable, and, in the long run, methodically impossible" (Bloomfield 92). Here Bloomfield referred to Saussure's distinction of 'synchronic/diachronic', which appeared again in his review of the *Course* and also in the article 'On Recent Work in General Linguistics' (1927). In his review of the *Course*, Bloomfield introduced the *langue/parole* distinction as follows:

> This rigid system, the subject-matter of 'descriptive linguistics', as we should say, is, *la langue*, the language. But *le langage,* human speech, includes something more, for the individuals who make up the community do not succeed in following the system with perfect uniformity. Actual speech-utterance, *la parole,* varies not only as to matters not fixed by the system. . . but also as to the system itself. . . (318-19)

Bloomfield took up the distinction again in 1927 where he reduced Saussure's system of signs to the physically observable elements of actual object and speech utterance casting aside what he considered 'the purely mental terms' of 'concept' and 'acoustic image' (177). The resulting reconceptualisation of *langue* and *parole* was tantamount to a rejection of the Saussurean distinction, and indeed after 1927 there are no evidences of Bloomfield having made use of these of terms.

Unlike Bloomfield, whose overt attention to Saussurean concepts was brief, lasting just a decade, Roman Jakobson's engagement was virtually life-long, beginning in his years in Europe and extending throughout the four decades of his life in the United States. The major Saussurean themes that occurred repeatedly in Jakobson's writings during the

Prague years were presented in seminal form in a single paper read to the Prague Linguistic Circle on 13 January 1927, a paper that Jakobson himself later selected as the lead item for the first published volume of his *Selected Writings* in 1962 (1-2). Here Jakobson maintained that 'Saussure and his school broke a new trail in static linguistics, but as to the field of language history they remained in the neogrammarian rut' and went on to challenge 'Saussure's teaching that sound changes are destructive forces, fortuitous and blind' (2). In the same paper Jakobson rejected Saussure's 'antinomy between synchronic and diachronic linguistic studies' and called for 'a transformation of historical phonetics into the history of the phonetic system' and a comparison of phonemic systems', both synchronic and diachronic, that 'enables us to lay down certain universally valid sound laws' (2).

Jakobson sees the practice of linguistics as a continual rectification of inaccurate theories and the positing of new theories, useful and important even if incomplete. Based closely on a lecture series he had presented in Copenhagen in 1939, Jakobson uses his six lectures on sound and meaning to challenge Saussure's linearity, which he considers incompatible with his own theory of phonological distinctive features, and to oppose Saussure's claims on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, at variance with his means-ends model of language (Jakobson 1963).

American linguistics received an impetus in a review by Zellig Harris, namely, Review of L.H. Gray, *Foundations of Language* (1940). The occasion in which Harris mentioned Saussure by name was to reject 'the langue-parole dichotomy of Saussure' and the 'science semiologique' (228). The latter involved 'a relation of "signifying". . . which requires something like teleology for its understanding' (ibid.); 'it cannot be studied objectively' (228). '"Parole"' Harris argues, "is merely the physical events which we count as language, while "langue" is the scientist's analysis and arrangements of them" (228).

Among Saussure's early analytic critics, the most influential were Ogden and Richards. In *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) Ogden and Richards strongly object to Saussure's formulation of *langue*. In fact, they do not criticize *langue* so much as the position it occupies in the general theory. They react to what they take for the epistemological and ontological anchorage of the subsequent theory. Saussure's distinction between *langue and parole* and especially his preference for the former in fact, posed as a challenge to

the analytical and pragmatic perspective shared by Ogden and Richards. They comment that "this theory of signs . . . was from the beginning cut off from any contact with *scientific methods of verification*" (*Meaning* 6). Nevertheless, Ogden and Richards deserve the credit of being two of the first   critics to have responded to and question some important Saussurean themes.

 Another prominent Saussurean critic who has taken Saussurean scholarship to great heights is Jonathan Culler. Culler is one Saussure scholar who has contributed to Saussurean studies not only by introducing the major themes of structuralism through works like *Saussure* (1986), but has examined at length the influence of structuralist ideals in areas such as literature with the publication of *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (1975). The greatest merit of Culler lies in his scholarship in both Saussurean structuralism and Derridean deconstruction, as a result of which he features as a prominent critic at the crossroads between them with works like *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1982), *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction.* (1981), and *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions.* (1988). For instance, Culler says in: the following lines from *On Deconstruction* (1982) indicate what may be termed a critique of structuralism as well as deconstruction:

> Any account of language, seeking solid foundation, will doubtless treat meaning as something somewhere present —say, present to consciousness at the moment of a signifying event; but any presence it invokes turns out to be already inhabited by difference . . . A scrupulous theory must shift back and forth between these perspectives, of event and structure, or *parole* and *langue*, which never lead to a synthesis. Each perspective shows the error of the other in an irresolvable alternation or aporia. (96)

However, one striking feature noted in Saussurean criticism is that the philosopher has more prominently been studied in an extensive manner under the premises of structuralist theory and that too by way of juxtaposition with other schools of critical theory, like New Criticism and Deconstruction. This somehow seems to lead to certain major concepts to be taken for granted, that is, to mean one particular idea. Accordingly, since the 1970s, there have been major publications presenting an introduction to Structuralism. In this case, mention may be made of the following: Michael Lane's

Introduction to Structuralism (1970), Frederic Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (1972), David Robey's *Structuralism: An Introduction* (1973), Terence Hawkes' *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977), John Sturrock's *Structuralism* (2003), *Structuralism and Since: From Levi-Strauss to Derrida* (1979), T. K. Seung's *Structuralism and Hermeneutics.* (1982), Edith Kurzweil's *The Age of Structuralism: Levi-Strauss to Foucault* (1980), Richard Harland's *Superstructuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (1987).

Besides, critics initially were more interested in looking at the implications of Saussure's philosophy on literature. Hence, works like the following gained prominence in the 1980s: John K Sheriff's *The Fate of Meaning: Charles Peirce, Structuralism and Literature.* (1989), Leonard Jackson's *The Poverty of Structuralism: Literature and Structuralist Theory* (1991). Of course, mention must be made here of R. Harris' for his variety of contribution not only on the study of Saussure and structuralism but also on the influence of structuralism and Saussure, as his list of works indicate: *Reading Saussure: A Critical Commentary on the Cours de linguistique generale* (1987), *Linguistic Thought in England 1914-1945* (1988), *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein: How to Play Games with Words* (1988), *Saussure and His Interpreters* (2001). One has also to mention the *Cambridge Companion to Saussure* (2004), edited by Carol Sanders. One remarkable feature of this work is the emphasis on the different information that each manuscript of the *Course* provided, apart from responses by critics to various Saussurean stances.

Apart from the above major contributions towards Saussurean philosophy, critics have also delved at length on the various other disciplines which Saussure has influenced. One such work which takes on from Saussure's philosophy is Vicky Kirby's *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (1997). In Kirby's words, "Identity is always divided from itself, constituted from a difference within (and between) itself, a difference that at the same time determines its difference from another, supposedly outside itself" (*Telling* 30). Kirby is clearly interested in reading Saussure backwards from Lacan, in the process, referring to "the excessive identity of the sign" (*Telling* 21). In Kirby's system, the problem of language and meaning arises not so much due to the arbitrary signifier-signified relationship, but to a confusion between essentialist and anti-essentialist usage

of language, where at the same moment, we find language embodying the physical materiality of which is any signifier's trace and the dissolution of the corporeality of language that gives language some sort of worldliness. For instance, talking about the invocation and denial of corporeality in language as a sign system, Kirby says: "This abode recalls a body that demonstrates its anti-essentialism by pinching its essentialism, a body that denies the violence of identity on the one hand by violent grasping of its identity with the other" (*Telling* 72). The idea is to repeatedly tease out the corporeal element or trace that sign-systems use and abuse. Kirby in a way alerts us to the second axis of language and meaning. Though Kirby does not directly deal with the idea of what Saussure calls 'value', she clearly aligns herself with issues of validity, and hierarchisation of meaning not just in language systems, but also in social systems.

Hence Saussurean scholarship ranges across all areas from literature to psychoanalysis as our review shows. However, one needs to appreciate that talking about the Saussurean dichotomies in a rather simplistic fashion has in fact lessened the scope for examining the weightage of each of his concepts. On doing so, one would actually be able to question the age-old connotations and examine it in the light of a logocentric metaphysics. This chapter therefore urges upon the necessity to 'redescribe' such concepts as *langue and parole* so as to explore if Saussure was actually speaking the deconstructionist language.

Language as a system of signs is characterized by the principle of arbitrariness. It is the very basis of the linguistic system yet the problem arises when the very systematicity of the system becomes responsible for limiting it: "[E]verything having to do with language as a system demands . . . to be treated from the point of view. . . of limiting the arbitrary" (129). Saussure talks about the sign as capable of being "motivated to a certain extent" (*Course* 130) when he refers to the mind as succeeding "in introducing a principle of order and regularity into certain areas of the mass of signs" (131). What is puzzling here is the point as to how it is that the fact that languages being products of the human mind is true only of their motivated parts and not of the arbitrary ones.

Similarly, Saussure's concept of the value also calls for attention. This is because in one instance he insists that "the notion of value . . . shows us that it is a great mistake to consider a sign as nothing more than the combination of a certain sound and a certain concept" (112) and that "the value of any given word is determined by what other words

there are in that particular area of the vocabulary" (114). This becomes a complicated issue when one considers the idea of 'differences' which 'distinguishes' concept from concept and sound-image from sound-image. According to Saussure, "signification and the signal are each, in isolation, purely differential and negative" (118-19). When two things are different, (i) one of them has at least one property which the other does not have, or (ii) although they both possess the same properties, they are nonetheless distinct entities. Saussure contends that signs differ, but the problem is that he does not elaborate as to how they differ. Examined from this point of view, the idea of the value appears to be a confusing one, in the sense that one fails to recognise as to how the value is different from ideas like the conceptual character of the sign.

An examination of these problematic issues in the *Course* is basically directed at looking for seeds of deconstruction in Saussure. Because, in case a sign is defined negatively by its constituent concept and sound-image and not by others, the concepts and sound-images become identical. Similarly, if a sign is defined by its syntagmatic relations to other signs, then the linguistic signs become indistinguishable from objects of any kind whatsoever. On the other hand, if paradigmatic relations are taken into consideration while examining the relations between signs, then the entire issue of language as a system is brought under scrutiny. In short, given the above circumstances, the much talked-about signifier seems to bear little resemblance to the signified Saussure examines while discussing the nature of the linguistic sign. Hence, it remains to be seen as to whether in the *Course* there is a contestation of the ideas of logocentrism which Saussure's text is since known to uphold.

In view of the above problematic issues, it would be pertinent to attempt at looking for an answer to the following crucial issues:

(i) In Saussure's view, language does not name objects. This raises an important question concerning the relation between perception and understanding: it remains to be examined as to whether linguistic categories correspond to the objects that one perceives as autonomous, or, on the contrary, dictate one's perception of objects.

(ii) Accordingly, analysing the ideas of the dual nature of the sign and the value of the term as determined by the overall system, the issue of iterability of signs needs to be looked into—if entities have to remain identical to themselves so that the larger mass of

the speaking community is able to identify them, it is imperative to examine the idea of the 'free play' of values

(iii) Above all, it is required that one studies the implications of the dual nature of the sign, the signifier/signified etc. Hence, it remains to be seen as to how the theory of the dual nature of the sign is related to the theory of the value when brought to bear simultaneously upon language.

(iv)   Finally, one needs to pursue an examination of two lines of thinking: (a) the interrelation between the orders of things, thoughts and language –their inextricable link with each other so as to resist any attempt to isolate one from the other, and (b) the heterogeneity among these orders which again resists any attempt to subsume them under one coherent system. Having said that, it would be of relevance to note as to what happens when the world of things takes on meaning and thereby it becomes difficult to distinguish between the thing and the sign.

II

In the *Course*, Saussure introduces the notion of a linguistic sign. A linguistic sign is said to be the basic unit of language, and it exhibits a dual nature: it consists of a unit of sound, which he calls a 'signifier' (*significant*), combined with a segment of thought, a 'signified' (*signifie*): "Any linguistic entity exists only in virtue of the association between signal and signification" (Saussure 101). Saussure's primary concern was to make apparent how a language works as an everyday mechanism, at anyone's disposal; in other words what is happening when one tries to think and speak in one's own language. Hence, his theory of the sign appears to be simply an attempt to specify the properties which signs possess and through which they acquire their conceptual identity. To this end, he goes on to assert that philosophers are generally wrong as they look at language as if it were simply a matter of naming, because, "The initial assignment of names to things establishing a contrast between concepts and sound patterns is an act we conceive in the imagination"(*Course* 71-2). According to him, the philosophers are unaware of two important aspects: on the one hand, the most important function of language does not consist in designating words to things, but in relating and combining words in different ways; and on the other hand, language is continually moving and

transforming itself. Saussure's example of a French word will further prove this first point:

> Suppose someone pronounces the French word *nu* ('naked'). At first sight, one might think this would be an example of an independently given linguistic object. But more careful considerations reveal a series of three to four different things, depending on the viewpoint adopted. The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint . . . rather . . . it is the viewpoint which creates the object. Furthermore, there is nothing to tell us in advance whether one of these ways of looking at it is prior to or superior to any of the others. (8)

What this comparison makes clear is that the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Second, the instance also demonstrates that no meaning can prevail without being linked to some concrete form. If not present to the speaker's consciousness, but merely a linguist's analytic convenience, it cannot be considered an actual part of the language, only an abstract non-linguistic idea. Hence, the signifier is strictly speaking, a sound-image rather than a sound—for people may utter the same sound in different ways or with different accents. A particular sound-image thus combines with a particular concept to yield a particular sign. This ought to mean that the signifier and the signified, conceived in isolation from one another are not part of the language—indeed nothing at all:

> Language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is one side of the sheet and sound the reverse side. Just as it is impossible to . . . cut one side of the paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought. (111)

It would be interesting to note here that even though the sign can be seen and described from two viewpoints (the signifier and the signified) which are inseparable from one another, the Saussurean sign is never a tangible, perceptible entity, to which a meaning of some kind is added. In fact, Saussure comes to a rather disconcerting conclusion that signs might not be recognizable at all as the following reference shows:

> All our incorrect ways of designating things belonging to language originate in our unwittingly supposing that we are dealing with a substance when we deal with linguistic phenomena. (120)

In this case, the crucial issue appears to be that if substances no longer exist in the ordinary sense, how do relationships function, and secondly, what is the criterion of identity of a linguistic sign? To add to this question is another of the problematic aspects of the sign as it is presented in the *Course*— that it is not an abstraction, but a real concrete object: "The signs of which a language is composed are not abstractions, but real objects . . . they can be called the *concrete entities* of this science"(144). On the other hand, the signifier and the signified considered separately from one another, are 'pure abstractions': "The linguistic entity exists only through the association of the signifier and the signified . . . take only one of these elements, and the linguistic entity vanishes; instead of a concrete object, you no longer have before you anything but a pure abstraction"(144).

Saussure does not indicate as to how two pure abstractions combine to form a concrete entity, while the whole conglomeration of these concrete entities is devoid of substance. The possible solution to this could be that by 'concrete entities' Saussure did not mean that the sign has substance, only that it is something to which the users of a language have mental access.

Going by this principle, when he speaks of the inseparability of the signifier and the signified, comparing them to the front and back of a sheet of paper, this is a facet of their abstractness. The signifier is not the actual sound that the ear perceives but the imprint of this sound on the mind, the representation we hold of what the sound ought to be in order to signify.

Consequently one may question whether this holds that things invariably precede words independently of any viewpoint and that words, secondary with regard to things, only designate them. Saussure himself does not rule out the problematic aspect of this matter:

> If I say simply that a certain word means this or that—going no further than identifying the concept associated with a particular sound pattern—then what I am saying may in some respects be accurate, and succeed in giving a correct picture. But I fail inevitably to capture the real linguistic fact, either in its basic essentials or in its full scope. (116)

Of course, Saussure is clear on the point that pure noise does not belong to language until it becomes meaningful and consequently identifiable:

The substance of sound . . . does not offer a ready-made mould with shapes that thoughts must inevitably conform to. It is a malleable material which can be fashioned into separate parts in order to supply the signals which thought has need of . . . (110)

Herein features the role of the principle of arbitrariness, because: ". . . any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on convention, which comes to the same thing" (66). In a language, meanings and rules are strictly established by agreeing on certain conventions. However, the interesting point here is that a living language keeps on changing continually and such changes occur without the speakers' coming to a general agreement about it, because they are least aware about them, because:

Legal procedures, religious rites, ships' flags etc. are systems used only by a certain number of individuals acting together and for a limited time. A language, on the contrary, is something in which everyone participates all the time. . . (74)

Saussure in the above seems to be drawing a contrast between Austin's instances of the 'things' 'done' by words and language as such, but considering this feature of transformation in language, one cannot help but assume the principle of arbitrariness in language:

Other human institutions—customs, laws, etc.—are all based in varying degrees on natural connexions between things. . . A language on the contrary is in no way limited in its choice of means . . . there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea with any sequence of sounds whatsoever. (76)

This in fact leads to a puzzling situation, because:

[A] s soon as we try to equate concrete units with words, we find ourselves in a dilemma. Either ignore the connexion, even though it is an obvious one, between *cheval* [horse] and *chevaux* ['horses']. . . or else dispense with concrete units and be content with the abstractions which groups together various forms of the same word . . . it is extremely difficult to unravel in a sequence of sounds the arrangement of units present, and to say which are the concrete elements the language is using. (104)

For him, arbitrariness and the social character of language are strictly dependent on each other:

> [F] rom the point of view of the linguistic community the signal is imposed rather than freely chosen. . . What can be chosen is already determined in advance. . . The community as much as the individual, is bound to its language. (71)

Therefore, Saussure makes it clear that 'arbitrary' does not mean that the signifier depends on the individual speaker's free choice only that it is 'unmotivated' relative to the signified, with no natural attachment between them: "The word *arbitrary* implies simply that the signal is 'unmotivated' (Saussure 68-9), because, as mentioned earlier in the *Course*, "At any given time it is an institution in the present and a product of the past" (9). Speakers in a given society can go on using and thereby altering their language because it is arbitrary, and it is arbitrary because it is social, depending entirely on being transmitted without any debate: "The arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. . . tends to protect a language against any attempt to change it" (73). Since "language is constantly open to the influence of all . . . a linguistic revolution is impossible", because "the community's natural inertia exercises a conservative influence upon it" (74). Interestingly enough, there is another side to this issue:

> If stability is a characteristic of languages, it is not only because languages are anchored in the community. They are also anchored in time. . . Continuity with the past constantly restricts freedom of choice. If the Frenchman of today uses words like *homme* ('man') and *chien* ('dog'), it is because these words were used by his forefathers. Ultimately there is a connexion between these two opposing factors: the arbitrary convention which allows free choice, and the passage of time, which fixes that choice. It is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and because it is founded that it can be arbitrary. (74)

From these facts Saussure deduces that the reality of a language cannot be fully comprehended without taking into account both its historical and social dimension, with regard to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. If the historical aspect is attended to, leaving aside the social, "imagining an isolated individual living for several centuries, we would perhaps note no alteration; time would not act on the language" (113). And if we attended to the social without the historical, "we would not see the effect of the social

forces acting on the language" (113). But as soon as we put the two together, we find that "the language is not free, because time will permit the social forces working upon it to develop their effects, and we arrive at the principle of continuity, which annuls its freedom" (113). Hence, "A language is a system which is intrinsically defenceless against the factors which constantly tend to shift relationships between signal and signification" (76). Moreover the definition of a word itself becomes difficult to attempt:

> [H]ere has been a great deal of controversy about what a word is. On further reflection, it becomes clear that what a word is usually taken to be does not correspond to our notion of a concrete unit. (103)

Thus, according to Saussure, words do not name objects:

> [T] the superficial view taken by the general public . . . sees a language merely as a nomenclature. This is a view which stifles any enquiry into the true nature of linguistic structure. (16)

So it becomes imperative to reexamine the original figure that Saussure uses to represent the dual nature of the linguistic sign which establishes a vertical relation between the signifier and the signified, wherein a vertical arrow implies an intrinsic relationship between a concept and its signifier—the fact that though the two are inseparable, they are distinct.

The matter becomes complicated when Saussure brings in a different model, in which the elements do not interact vertically, as in the previous figure, but horizontally. The immediate consequence of this new model is that not only do words not name objects, but they do not name concepts either. Words merely interact so as to sum up a meaning amongst them: "A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous existence of all the others" (113). Saussure's theory of the sign appears to be simply an attempt to specify the properties which signs possess and through which they acquire their conceptual identity. The foremost characteristic of linguistic units is the relativity within the system—independent of any external "reality", be it objective or conceptual.

Thus he remarks about the "serious fault of philosophers" who hold that once a sign is created, the idea attached to it (the signified) remains unchanged. While on the other

hand, Saussure says that the sign is always subject to change due to the fact that a possible variation in a nearby term may affect the first. However it is worthy of note that for Saussure, signs have only relational properties, while in reality, it is difficult to deny that they have non-relational properties as well.

This idea is elaborated in the second section of the *Course*, when Saussure asks as to what is the criterion of identity of a linguistic sign. How do we recognize that the 'same' sign is used on several occasions?

> The link between two uses of the same word is not based upon material identity, nor upon exact similarity of meaning, but upon factors the linguist must discover, if he is to come anywhere near to revealing true nature of linguistic units. (107)

Saussure tries to "examine the problem of identity in linguistics in the light of some non-linguistic examples":

> We assign identity, for instance, to two trains ('the 8.45 from Geneva to Paris'), one of which leaves twenty-four hours after the other. We treat it as the 'same' train, even though probably the locomotive, the carriages, the staff etc. are not the same. Or if a street is demolished and then rebuilt, we say it is the same street, although there may be physically little or nothing left of the old one. How is it that a street can be reconstructed and still be the same? Because it is not a purely material structure. It has other characteristics independent of its bricks and mortar, for example, its situation in relation to other streets. Similarly, the train is identified by its departure time, its route, and any other features which distinguish it from other trains. Whenever the same conditions are fulfilled, the same entities reappear. (107)

Thus what identifies a train as a type and not as a concrete particular is its relation to other trains within an overall schedule of trains. Saussure contends that even linguistic signs are identified in this way: each is recognized over and over again to be the 'same' sign because it has the same set of relations to other signs that belong to the same language as itself. It occupies, as it were, the same place in the system.

But this brings to the fore another problem as to what happens to the schema representing the dual nature of the sign with a vertical arrow. As both the diagrams coexist in the *Course* it is not by accident or impulse that Saussure adopted the second

schema with horizontal lines. Thus the question remains as to how Saussure objects so emphatically to an approach that would entail taxonomies. This he does while maintaining the theory of the dual nature of the sign in which the vertical arrow between the signifier and the signified implies that the combination resists contamination with other terms. On the other hand, in different contexts, cultural, social, historical, the same word may have different connotations. Hence its connotation is a function of the system of contexts in which the word occurs—this is a horizontal relationship. At the same time, despite the variety of systems and the resultant connotations, its denotation remains unaffected. The resistance of this denotation to contextuality implies the vertical relationship Saussure attributes to the first schema of the dual nature of the sign.

It is here that the notion of value enters the play. For, as Saussure says, when a sign occupies the same place in a system, it has 'the same value'. He makes a sharp contrast between value and signification: signification is that property of signs by virtue of which it expresses a concept, while the value of a sign is determined by virtue of its relations to other signs:

> [A] word can be substituted for something dissimilar: an idea. At the same time, it can be compared to something of like nature: another word. Its value is therefore not determined merely by that concept or meaning for which it is taken. It must also be assessed against comparable values by contrast with other words. (*Course* 114)

By way of illustration, Saussure compares *sheep* with *mutton*:

> The French word *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*; but it does not have the same value. There are various reasons for this, but in particular the fact that the English word for the meat of this animal, as prepared and served for a meal is not *sheep* but *mutton*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* hinges on the fact that in English there is also another word *mutton* for the meat, whereas *mouton* in French covers both. (114)

This implies that according to Saussure, "the value of any given word is determined by what other words there are in that particular area of the vocabulary" (114), because:

If words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case. French uses the same verb *louer* ('hire', 'rent') both for granting and for taking a lease, whereas German has two separate verbs, *mieten* and *vermieten*: so there is no exact correspondence between the values in question . . . In all these cases what we find, instead of *ideas* given in advance, are *values* emanating from a linguistic system. (114-5)

Thus it is not possible to speak of two distinct objects, one called sheep and the other mutton: it is only the juxtaposition of the two and their coexistence in the same system that will guarantee their semantic difference, which is the 'value' of each.

However, something has to resist semantic permutations and contaminations so that we agree on the meaning of linguistic units and communicate among ourselves. Saussure traces this resistance to the "immutability of the sign", which he attributes to the general cohesion of the system and the speaking mass. But in that case, words would not be able to interact horizontally: as a result of their immutability, the horizontal interaction between words would not be possible, thereby suggesting the vertical relationship of the dual nature of the sign. This possibly indicates that the dual nature of the sign represented by the vertical arrow between the signifier and the signified and the horizontal representation in which the signs split all the meaning among themselves, are mutually exclusive. To further complicate the problem, Saussure seems to favour one or the other at different times. Hence, though he highlights only the relational properties of signs, he seems to also vouch for their non-relational properties.

The following instance will help clarify certain ideas:

The idea of sister is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified "ox" has as its signifier *b-ö-f* on one side of the border and *o-k-s* on the other. (*Course* 67-68)

In the above example, it is assumed that the ideas of sister and ox are clear and universal, so that they become signifieds. Accordingly the signifieds are permanent, only the signifiers are variable. Consequently, the function of language would be only to

designate ideas, which, in their capacity are fixed representations of natural objects. Linguistic mechanism would then hinge on the same representation of objects by concepts and the concepts by language—something which Saussure vehemently rejects:

> The paradoxical part of it is this. On the one hand the concept appears to be just the counterpart of a sound pattern. . . On the other hand this linguistic sign itself as the link uniting two constituent elements, likewise has counterparts. These are the other signs in the language. A language is a system in which all the elements fit together and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others. So how does it come about that value, as defined, can be equated with meaning, i.e with the counterpart of the sound pattern? (*Cours*e 113)

However, the example suggested above cannot be rejected outright as it demonstrates the two faces of the sign as well as the arbitrary manner in which they combine in a given language to form a sign and consequently to signify. What becomes clear in this process is the fact that the rift is not between the theory and the example but between two different aspects of the theory itself—the dual nature of the sign and the value of a term as determined by the overall system. If entities have to remain identical to themselves in order to be recognized and to allow for communication as units of language, how do we account for the free play of values that is essential to *langue* in a system?

The problem is further complicated by the feature of the "immutability" of the sign: an individual cannot change at will the system of differences and oppositions that determine the two faces of the sign. At any given moment therefore, entities seem predetermined. Hence, in the *Course*, Saussure while refining his theory, in most instances problematized it. The following instance will prove this point:

> Consider a knight in chess. Is the piece by itself an element of the game? Certainly not. . . It becomes a real concrete element only when it takes on or becomes identified with its value in the game. Suppose that during a game this piece gets destroyed or lost. Can it be replaced? Of course it can. Not only by some other knight, but even by an object of quite a different shape, which can be counted as a knight, provided it is assigned the same value as the missing piece. (108-9)

This comparison makes it clear that no meaning can prevail without being linked to some concrete form, and also that none of the signifying pieces can be used as such without being related to the other pieces in the same system. Secondly, the comparison suggests that the specific material that the pieces in chess are made of does not matter at all, but only the fact that they consist of perceptible elements of any sort whatsoever and that these are linked with meaning in some indissoluble way.

Thus the value of each piece taken in isolation is unmotivated: nothing intrinsic dictates the value of each piece. This entails that the system is always there, because without it the value of each piece would be almost nothing. This brings us to another paradox: it is because there is a system that there are values that, viewed from outside this system, seem arbitrary. But it is also because there is a system that this arbitrariness is limited. In fact Saussure refers to this aspect of the principle of arbitrariness:

> [T] he entire linguistic system is founded upon the irrational principle that the sign is arbitrary. Applied without restriction, this principle would lead to utter chaos. . . Languages always exhibit features of both kinds—intrinsically arbitrary and relatively motivated—but in varying proportions. (131)

It appears that the internal cohesion of the system and its acceptance by a collective body guarantee both the mutability and the immutability of signs and values, their absolute arbitrariness as well as their relative motivation. Hence, "Linguistic signals are not in essence phonetic. They are not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by differences . . ." (117). However, the next few pages bear another explanation in this regard: ". . . in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds . . ." (118):

> Although signal and signification are each, in isolation, purely differential and negative, their combination is a fact of a positive nature. It is indeed, the only order of facts linguistic structure comprises. (118-9)

This looks like an argument in favour of the point that if 'difference' has a purely negative character that Saussurean scholars are so obsessed with, it will be difficult to consider as to how it results from either the syntagmatic or the paradigmatic type of relation. The latter type, of course produces differences, but such differences exist

between signs, such as between *sheep* and *mutton*. On the other hand, syntagmatic relations are ordered connections between signs, not differences between signs.

Therefore it appears that the value of a linguistic sign cannot be determined by its position within a "complete linguistic system", that is, "a complete language". In fact, the idea of a "complete language" seems remote:

> The characteristic role of a language in relation to thought is . . . to act as intermediary between thought and sound . . . what happens is neither a transformation of thoughts into matter, nor a transformation of sounds into ideas. What takes place is a somewhat mysterious process by which 'thought-sound' evolves divisions, and a language takes shape with its linguistic units in between these two amorphous masses. (110-11)

However, the basic problem of the idea of a system appears to be that if substances no longer exist in the ordinary sense, how do relationships function, and secondly, of what and in what does value consist? Saussure, while acknowledging extralinguistic reality also suggests that both discrete words and things result from the reference to the epistemic and phenomenal spheres, but nowhere does he indicate how one should sort out oppositions and differences. He says that "In the language itself, there are only differences" (118), but how does one distinguish them without leaving the boundaries of language? To cite an example, trains and streets, Saussure considers, are identified by their positions relative to other trains and streets, and not by their material substance of which they are composed. The reality however, is that the material substance is as important as their relations to one another. A relation holds between or among things of a certain 'type' and it cannot be formulated or thought of, if the properties which make them belong to one type are not known. Same is the case with language. Any linguistic relation, syntagmatic, paradigmatic or any other can be formulated or even conceived only after certain identifiable character(s) can be determined among or between the things to be related.

Relations like resemblances or differences between linguistic units might appear to be exceptions in this case. But one cannot deny the fact that if such relations are exceptional cases, it is primarily because these relations may be said to be complete only when it is specified in what respect things are asserted to be alike or dissimilar:

[A] word can be substituted for something dissimilar: an idea. At the same time it can be compared to something of like nature: another word . . . The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it. (114)

Saussure seems to have realised that from the fact that two things differ, or are alike, nothing follows. To cite an instance, a tree entertains many semantic relationships—like, it is a living thing, but not an animal, a plant but not a grass or flower, a bushy thing but not a shrub or a bush—the idea that it provides shade quite unthinkably, might not even prevail over these other differences and oppositions.

Therefore probably he left it to the intuitive speaker who knows what things or words belong together: "[T]hese difficulties do not arise for the language users themselves. Anything which is significant in any way strikes them as being a concrete unit and they do not fail to notice it in discourse" (104).

 Hence, when we choose to oppose *bet* to *bat* rather than to any other utterance, we are undeniably guided by the perception of a relation: *bet* and *bat* are alike in a way that does not apply to *bet* and *aeroplane*. Thus he assumes that one will not mix systems inadvertently and that homogeneity is intuitive: "A language, as a collective phenomenon takes the form of a totality of imprints in everyone's brain, rather like a dictionary of which each individual has an identical copy" (19). Towards the end of the *Course*, Saussure reiterates this idea while discussing analogy: "Any creation has to be preceded by an unconscious comparison of materials deposited in the store held by the language, where the sponsoring forms are arranged by syntagmatic and associative relations" (164).

On the other hand, this is more easily said than done because it is said that:

Other human institutions—customs, laws, etc.—are all based in varying degrees on natural connexions between things. . . A language on the contrary is in no way limited in its choice of means . . . there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea with any sequence of sounds whatsoever. (76)

In fact through long usage, words have undergone changes to the extent that: ". . . what [words] have in common is that they are purely and simply misunderstood forms which

have been reinterpreted in terms of known forms" (173). What a word signifies, Saussure insists, is itself part of the word, inseparable from it. Whether words 'have' meanings or 'contain' them seems like a semantic quibble.

III

 The obvious outcome of the above issue is that linguistic units can forever shift around and any attempt to provide them with an anchorage is "serious faults of philosophers". The semantic content of these units depends on the virtue of the overall cohesion of the system. Accordingly, the true figuration of language would have to take into account the ways in which differences and oppositions distribute all the meaning available to a community into blocks and the mutual dependence. Of course, whether meaning can actually be summed up is a question Saussure never seems to have addressed. But he asserts one thing: words refer neither to objects nor to concepts. Consequently, linguistic units can forever shift around: "A language . . . has no immediately perceptible entities. And yet one cannot doubt that they exist, or that the interplay of these units is what constitutes linguistic structure" (105). For, according to Saussure, what differentiates one concept or sound-image from another is the place that it occupies in the system. But when it is said that a concept is defined by its 'not being' any other concept, it appears, to be another way, to some extent misleading, of saying that it occupies a place different from any other, in the language system. In a sense, all concepts can be substituted with one another—but then, if a concept is substituted for another, it would come to occupy the other's place and would thus become another concept. For, a concept or a sound-image is simply a point in the system.

 This is perhaps why Saussure seems to be discussing the implications of the idea of "differences . . . and no positive terms" (*Course* 118), with caution. He considers this argument as valid only when the levels of the signifier and the signified are taken separately. When the sign is reconstituted and the signifier and the signified are taken as a whole, "their combination is of a positive nature" (119). This seems to be confusing because as Saussure's analogy of the chemical compound (111) and that of the two sides of the sheet of paper (111) show, the signifier and the signified are inseparable and hence the idea of differences without positive terms appears impossible. A possible conclusion

one can draw from this is that the signified as detached from the signifier exists independently or 'transcendentally'. However, Saussure seems to be looking forward to Derrida when he goes against this and contests the idea of language as a nomenclature and the analogy of the signifier and the signified as body and soul.

 In fact seeds of Derridean deconstruction seem evident even if the signifier and signified are considered to be inseparable when the principle of arbitrariness of the sign is seen as entailing the concept of difference:

> Since there is no vocal image that answers better than any other to what it is charged in saying, it is obvious, even *a priori*, that a fragment of language can never be grounded, in the last analysis, on anything other than its non-coincidence with the rest *Arbitrary* and *differential* are two correlative categories" (*Cours*e 134)

Signs achieve their identity not through any positive features but insofar as they are different from other signs, and hence bear in them the trace of all the signs they are not. in fact Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (1993) extends this principle of arbitrariness and difference by Saussure—once any element in a system is identified in terms of the relation of differences, as it is once the property of arbitrariness of signs is considered, then the structure becomes one in which any given 'present' element is always haunted by the 'absent' elements which it is not.

Similarly, as Saussure's views on the ideas of the linguistic value and difference increasingly suggest, language in fact functions through the general reference of signifiers to other signifiers, the 'value' of a signifier summarising its differential relationships with other signifiers in the system. As a result, the meaning of a given signifier is an effect of its differential relation to all the others, so that, in Derridean terms, a 'signified' is only a signifier occupying a certain position determined by other signifiers. Signifiers therefore refer to other signifiers and hence the existence of 'meaning' in the form of a signified seems only to be a consequence of that referral. Thus it comes to the point that a signifier is never a signifier in correlation to a signified but a signifier of other signifiers. So it comes to this that to give the meaning is not to recover something that was present when I uttered a particular word, but to fill up the space with other signs, to characterize some of the distinctions that define it. In this way, Saussure's insistence on the differential nature of linguistic units seems to work against

logocentrism, questioning the idea of language as a system of signs by suggesting that (a) there are forces at work below the level of the sign, and (b) signs are not phenomenally given.

One is often confronted with the difficult situation of fitting codes to phenomena—meaning as a product of conventions seems to be supplanted by a tension between two other notions of meaning: meaning as a property of texts or objects and meaning as significance. Saussure however makes it clear towards the end of the *Course*:

> [L]inguistic unity may disintegrate when a spoken language undergoes the influence of a literary language. . . By *literary language* is here to be understood not only the language of literature but also in a more general sense every variety of cultivated language, whether official or not, which is at the service of the community. (193)

From the above, it seems fairly clear that Saussure resorts to the ordinary way of talking about words and things and hence meaning is often to be understood in the ordinary way as a possession of a community: "[F]rom the point of view of the linguistic community, the signal is imposed rather than freely chosen. . . What can be chosen is already determined in advance" (71). As a result, the distance between the word and the thing is punctuated by varied instances of linguistic involvement by different communities of speakers of the language so much so that the word becomes very much "like a house of which the internal and arrangement and purposes have been changed on various occasions" (182). Since "occasions" are unlimited, therefore, a one-to-one correspondence between a word and a thing is always already a matter of postponement. Therefore the deconstuctionist in Saussure realises that "words do not answer exactly to our definition of linguistic units" and so "since we cannot have direct access to concrete entities and linguistic units", he takes "words as examples" (112), because, as he says on an earlier occasion, ". . . what a word is usually taken to be does not correspond to our notion of a concrete unit" (103). It is with this concern that Saussure warns the reader in the very beginning:

> It is to be noted that we have defined things and not words. . . No word corresponds precisely to any one of the notions. . . That is why all definitions based on words are vain. It is an error of method to proceed from words in order to give definitions of things. (14)

This brings us to another crucial issue. By now, it is apparent that meaning is not a constant property of words, but continually changes and fluctuates with time as well as with geography. But it is often less acknowledged that our knowledge of meaning is not constant either. Saussure in fact seems to assert this in the many metaphors that he uses to describe the inconstancy of meaning in words, rather the inconstancy of the word itself, because, after all, "A language is a dress patched with pieces of its own material" (170). Accordingly, one might as well say with Derrida that "there is no non-metaphoric language". Saussure's own instances suggest that arbitrary signs of the linguistic system may be part of a larger discursive system in which effects of motivation, demotivation and remotivation are always occurring.

Hence a rereading of Saussure in the line of Lacan and Derrida which generates an entirely new line of critical thinking discussed in the chapters to follow alerts us to the problems of discourse and complexities of signification that suffuse the practices of a culture and require semiotic analysis—the attempt to show, in each area, that meanings or truths we might be inclined to take as given are products of semiotic systems, has been a powerful means of demystification and analysis.