

The foresight of Saussure's outlook on language

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Abstract: This paper makes an in-depth analysis and discussion on Saussure's concept of linguistic sign in combination with *Course in General Linguistics*, the analysis shows that Saussure's linguistic sign has rich connotations: First, language is a system of signs; second, linguistics belongs to semiotics; third, linguistic sign is the combination of signals and signification. Arbitrariness and linearity are the two basic principles of Saussure's linguistic sign. Iconicity is a discussion of linguistic sign from the perspective of combinational linguistic sign, which cannot shake the position of Saussure's arbitrariness principle of linguistic sign. The linearity of linguistic sign is the foundation of the formation of linguistic system structure. Saussure's linguistic sign has the sociality, psychology, systematicness, stabilization, variability and universality. The contribution of Saussure's view of linguistic sign lies in clarifying the research object of linguistics, laying the theoretical foundation of modern semiotics, promoting interdisciplinary research and driving the construction of linguistic semiotics. The connotation, basic principles, characteristics and contribution of Saussure's linguistic sign can fully reflect his perspective on language.

1. Introduction

In the late 19th century, the natural sciences and social sciences experienced unprecedented major changes, and structuralism began to emerge in the development of the discipline. The Swiss linguist Saussure promoted structuralism to the stage of discipline development, and his new linguistic theories and methods established his historical position.

Saussure's structuralism started the development of modern linguistics. However, Saussure initially worked with the neogrammarians, and his research work was the historical comparison of Indo-European languages. His paper *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indoeuropéennes* and his doctoral dissertation *De l'emploi du génitif absolu en sanscrit* are both masterpieces of historical comparative linguistics. Saussure was later influenced by the trend of Gestalt psychology, and his view of language changed greatly, especially in the General Linguistics course taught three times at the University of Geneva.[1]

Saussure did not publish a treatise explaining his brand-new linguistic theory in the later period, until his students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye compiled and published *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916, which based on the notes of Saussure's students, Saussure's personal notes and

other related materials, so people have the main channel to explore Saussure's linguistic theory. Needless to say, since the *Course in General Linguistics* was not written by Saussure himself, it was inevitable that this book will differ from Saussure's language theory in terms of expression and wording, but the good thing is that the basic views and content are not distorted and can represent Saussure's linguistic thought to a certain extent, "It is a relatively complete basic reading for understanding Saussure's language theory and plays an irreplaceable role in the history of linguistics." [2]. This book has also become Saussure's only handed down linguistics work.

Modern Linguistics builds on the basic concepts and fundamental theories centered on linguistic sign in *Course in General Linguistics*, the book which lays the foundations of modern linguistics, structuralism and semiotics. Saussure's foresight of semiotics, his profound understanding of linguistic sign, and his elaboration of the relationship between linguistics and semiotics all reflect Saussure's view of linguistic sign, which is also the core issue to be discussed in this paper.

After Saussure put forward the idea of semiotics, it also rapidly developed into an independent discipline, but semiotics has never been truly allied with linguistics since its germination. Chinese scholars have actively explored the establishment of linguistic semiotics. Wang Mingyu was the first to advocate the establishment of the discipline of linguistic semiotics in China, who compiled and published the first monograph *Linguistic Semiotics*, which has conducted extensive and in-depth discussion on many core elements of linguistic semiotics. [3] Obviously, the establishment of linguistic semiotics must rely on Saussure's thought of linguistic semiotics. We agree that "the emergence of linguistic semiotics as an independent discipline is the inheritance and development of Saussure's semiotics and the inevitable product of the internal development requirements of linguistics and semiotics" [4].

Based on the book *Course in General Linguistics*, this paper re-examines Saussure's discourse on linguistic sign, focusing on the connotation, basic principles, characteristics and significance of Saussure's linguistic sign, and excavates his view on language signs. This paper aims to clarify the foresight of Saussure's view of linguistic sign and to provide some enlightenment and reference for the future research of Saussure's linguistic theory and the construction of linguistic semiotics.

2. The connotation of Saussure's linguistic sign

It is necessary to clarify the connotation of Saussure's linguistic sign before discussing the problems related to them. In Saussure's view, as a special social system, language is different from political and legal systems. Therefore, a new kind of facts such as semiotics must be cited to explain the special nature of language. Saussure mentioned: It is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as a part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. The science he was referring to was semiotics.

On the one hand, Saussure believes that a language is a system of signs expressing ideas, which determines to some extent that the linguist's task is to define what makes language a special type of system within the totality of semiological facts. Saussure also elaborated on the relationship between linguistics and semiotics. As he said, if we have now for the first time succeeded in assigning linguistics its place among the sciences, that is because we have grouped it with semiotics, linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiotics will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge, so the linguistic problem is first and foremost semiological. Obviously, Saussure regarded linguistics as a part of semiotics.

On the other hand, Saussure has repeatedly explained that linguistic units are dual in nature, comprising two elements. In addition, Saussure saw that linguistic sign linked concepts and sound pattern rather than things and names in people's conventional perception, concept and sound pattern

are intimately linked and each triggers the other. On this basis, Saussure discussed the important question of terminology in particular, he said that a sign is the combination of a concept and a sound pattern, then kept the term sign to designate the whole, and replace concept and sound pattern respectively by signification and signal, and proposed that the latter terms signification and signal can indicate the distinction which separates each from the other and both from the whole of which they are part. It can be seen that Saussure's signification and signal are opposites and unity, the opposites are two completely different components of linguistic sign, and unity is that they always exist simultaneously in the whole of linguistic sign.

To sum up, the connotation of Saussure's linguistic sign includes at least three points: 1) Language is a system of sign; 2) Linguistics belongs to semiotics; 3) Linguistic sign are the unity of signal and signification.

3. The basic principles of Saussure's linguistic sign

In order to clarify the nature of language, Saussure envisaged the birth and development of semiotics in the future, and then conducted a comprehensive study of the characteristics of language with the help of semiotics. Linguistic sign has become the most basic concepts in Saussure's linguistic theory, and correspondingly, "the sign is arbitrary" and "linear character of the signal" have become the two basic principles of Saussure's linguistic sign.

3.1. The sign is arbitrary

Arbitrariness is the first principle of Saussure's linguistic theory, it means that the link between signal and signification is arbitrary. Saussure said that a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, so it can be directly understood as "the linguistic sign is arbitrary". Saussure clearly stated that the difference between languages and the existence of different languages can prove the arbitrariness of linguistic sign, that there is no natural connection between signal and signification of linguistic sign, signs which are entirely arbitrary convey better than others the ideal semiological process. It is precisely because of the arbitrary principle of linguistic sign that language, the most complex expression system, has become a model in the whole semiotics.

Saussure has repeatedly emphasized that the relationship between signal and signification of linguistic sign is unarguable. He believes that it is untenable to use onomatopoeia and exclamatory words to oppose the arbitrariness of linguistic sign, because onomatopoeia and interjection have never been established. Not an organic component of the language system, and the choice of such words is already somewhat arbitrary.

The principle of arbitrariness of linguistic sign has aroused fierce debates in the academic circles, and some scholars have used the viewpoints of iconicity and demonstrability to refute the arbitrariness theory. In China, since Wang Yin published his articles and works on the iconicity of linguistic sign, the issue of the arbitrariness of linguistic sign has been even more debated.[5] After discussing with Wang Yin, Guo Hong thought that Wang Yin had ignored the difference between signs and sign combinations, he believed that iconicity and demonstrability are universal for symbolic combinations (linguistic structures), but arbitrariness is universal for individual signs.[6] In fact, Saussure also has the theory of absolute arbitrariness and relative arbitrariness, and agree with a relatively arbitrary view of language structure. Saussure advocated a distinction between the fundamentally arbitrary and the relatively arbitrary in each language, and the interrelation between associative relation and syntagmatic relation limits the arbitrariness, so that the sign may be motivated to a certain extent. It can be concluded that the essence of arbitrariness and iconicity of linguistic sign is to analyze linguistic sign at different levels of sign. We believe that for a single

linguistic sign, the relationship between signal and signification of linguistic sign is arbitrary, while for a combinative linguistic sign, the meaning of the linguistic sign does have evidence to follow, and this level of iconicity is valid. In this way, the relative arbitrariness of linguistic sign is based on arbitrariness. Of course, the principle of iconicity or relative arbitrariness of linguistic sign cannot shake the position of Saussure's primary principle of arbitrariness of linguistic sign.

3.2. Linear character of sign

The linear character of Saussure's linguistic sign is the linear character of signal of linguistic sign. The sound pattern is replaced by signal, and the formation of the sound pattern is inseparable from the hearing, so it is said that the linguistic signal, being auditory in nature. Saussure pointed out that visual signal is opposite to the auditory signal, the visual signal can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously, but auditory signals have available to them only the linearity of time; the elements of such signals are presented one after another, they form a chain. Saussure's signal hence certain temporal characteristics, it occupies a certain temporal space. Correspondingly, this space is measured in just one dimension: it is a line. Saussure believed that when words were used to represent auditory signals, the spatial lines of written sign could reflect the chronological order of auditory signals, so the linear principle of linguistic sign was obvious.

Guo Hong also has a clear understanding of linear character of linguistic sign. He believes that linearity is one of the pillars of the linguistic mechanism, and linearity is the order, which belongs to the horizontal combination of vertical selection and horizontal combination of linguistic sign, syntagmatic relations. In most cases, it is impossible for human to use a single linguistic sign when using language. Instead, sign must be combined into codes according to the principle of linearity. Therefore, linearity is the foundation of language structure.[7]

As Saussure said, it is a fundamental principle and its consequences are incalculable, its importance equals that of the first law. The whole mechanism of linguistic structure depends upon it. We also believe that the linear principle of signals is of great significance to the structural characteristics of language systems, and the linearity of linguistic sign provides the possibility for discrete linguistic sign to be combined into language units of different sizes.

4. The characteristics of Saussure's linguistic sign

Saussure's linguistic theory opened up a new era in the history of linguistics. Saussure was able to put forward the concept of linguistic sign at the development level of linguistic and natural science at that time, and showed the thought of linguistic semiotics, which is enough to show that Saussure was a linguistic genius. His study of linguistic sign is different from the previous linguistic studies and has many distinctive characteristics.

4.1. Sociality

Saussure stated that the study of linguistics needs to take the study of linguistic structure as our primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it. He definitely homogenized language from speech, making language a very definite object in the mixed totality of speech. Language is a social product of our language faculty. Of course, it is also a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty. Thus, Saussure regarded language as a social part of speech. At the same time, Saussure's linguistics is attached to semiotics, so linguistic sign must be within the scope of semiotics, and linguistic sign is social by nature, then language as a sign system must be social. Furthermore, contrary to what might appear to be the case, a language never exists even for a moment except as a social fact, for it

is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its internal characteristics. It is not difficult to see that Saussure's linguistic sign have typical social characteristics, and sociality is also the most essential feature of Saussure's linguistic sign.

4.2. Psychology

Saussure believed that linguistic sign was within the realm of psychology. He tried to find language in the speech circulatory system, where the conscious facts of concepts are linked with the sound images of the linguistic sign that express them. If a concept causes a sound image in the brain, Saussure thought it was entirely a psychological phenomenon. Saussure emphasized from the very beginning that semiotics is a part of general psychology, in Saussure's system of linguistic sign, both parts of the sign being psychological, concepts are essentially mental representations of things, a sound pattern is not a physical sound, but refers to psychological properties. The sound pattern is a sound imprint that remains in the mind, as in Saussure's example, that we can speak to ourselves in the mind without moving our lips and tongues, which is a good illustration of the psychological nature of the sound pattern, the linguistic sign is a two-sided psychological entity. In short, Saussure's linguistic sign is psychological in character.

4.3. Systematicness

Saussure analyzed language as a system of units and relational system. The systematicness of linguistic sign is the core of Saussure's structuralism. He regards language as a typical structure, and the description of each language unit in a unified language system is valuable. Saussure's exposition of language value and language relation can reflect the systematic characteristics of his linguistic sign.

The first is linguistic value. Saussure believes that linguistic sign system is a formal system established by collective agreement, language is form rather than substance, and it is a system composed of a series of related values. In Saussure's linguistic sign system, various elements are balanced with each other according to certain rules, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others. Therefore, it is the opposition between signal and signification in the linguistic sign and the opposition between this linguistic sign and other linguistic sign in the linguistic sign system that endows the value of linguistic sign. In other words, the value of language is based on the linguistic sign system, and the systematicness of linguistic sign is the real meaning of language value.

Then there is the language relationship. A single linguistic sign has no meaning, and can only obtain its meaning from the distinguishing relationship with other linguistic sign. Saussure said that everything depends on relation in a linguistic state, and the relationship between syntagmatic relation and associative relation are the two global and fundamental relationships in the linguistic sign system. Syntagmatic relation is the combination of linguistic sign in praesentia, while associative relation is the memory series of linguistic sign in absentia. The two relations are interdependent and mutually restrictive. Syntagmatic space promotes the establishment of associative cooperation, which is often the premise of separating all parts of syntagmatic segments. The two sets formed by syntagmatic relations and associative relations run simultaneously, bringing all linguistic sign into the language system. Similarly, linguistic relations also highlight the systematic characteristics of Saussure's linguistic sign.

4.4. Stabilization

Stabilization is the invariability of linguistic sign. Saussure perceived that the choice of the

concepts represented by the signal was free, but instead, from the point of view of the linguistic community, the signal is imposed rather than freely chosen. He believed that any given linguistic state is always the product of historical factors, and these are the factors which explain why the linguistic sign is invariable, that is to say why it is immune from arbitrary alteration. The first is the principle of arbitrariness itself tends to protect a language against any attempt to change it, in addition, the great number of science necessary to constitute a language, and the language system is complex. At the same time, collective inertia resists or linguistic innovations, individuals are less likely to change the correlation of linguistic sign, all these factors make linguistic sign less likely to change, therefore, linguistic sign show a trend of stability.

4.5. Variability

The variability of linguistic sign is based on the principle of linguistic continuity, which is guaranteed by time. The variability of linguistic sign mainly refers to the transfer of the relationship between signal and signification. Saussure believes that language is simply unable to resist the factors that promote the transfer of the relationship between signal and signification. The language is no longer free from constraints, because the passage of time allows social forces to be brought to bear upon it. One is left with a principle of community which precludes freedom of choice. At the same time community necessarily implies change. Relations will alter in some respect or other. Therefore, Saussure's language research does not give up the diachronic factor, and the variability of his linguistic sign is based on diachronic thinking.

4.6. Universality

Saussure's linguistic sign is a social psychological phenomenon formed by the combination of signal and signification. His linguistic sign actually refers to the potential rule system applicable to social communication but separated from the specific context. It is a sign system that can be used by anyone at anytime and anywhere to express ideas. Therefore, Saussure's linguistic sign is universality. Saussure's language is a kind of abstraction, linguistic sign can refer to the is arbitrary, and the corresponding with the speaker and the listener is who, for what, it doesn't matter what time what place, also because of this, Saussure's signal to all members of a language community working together, to mutual understanding for all members.[8]

Generally speaking, Saussure's linguistic sign has the characteristics of sociality, psychology, systematicness, stabilization, variability and universality. Sociality is its essential characteristic. These characteristics are based on the arbitrariness and linear principle of Saussure's linguistic sign. The relevant characteristics of linguistic sign improve the richness of Saussure's thought of language.

5. The Contribution of Saussure's Linguistic Sign

5.1. It Defined the Object of Linguistic Study

Saussure believed that historical comparative linguistics failed to build language into a real science with vague research objects, so the task of linguistics is to find objects of study to draw linguistic boundaries. In the process of looking for linguistics research object, Saussure distinguished language and speech from speech activities, introduced semiotics to explain why language is a sign system, clarified the connotation and attributes of linguistic sign, and proposed that the real research object of linguistics should be homogeneous language with psychological attributes and social essence. "The only true object of study in linguistics is the language,

considered in itself and for its own sake.[9]" The clarification of the nature of linguistic sign and the limitation of the object of linguistic research push linguistic research into a new field. Saussure's linguistic sign theory makes linguistics truly become an independent science.

5.2. It Laid the Theoretical Foundation of Modern Semiotics

In the 1960s, the publication of Roland Barthes's *Éléments de sémiologie* marked that semiotics officially became a discipline and semiotics theory began to take shape.[10] Saussure had his thoughts on semiotics as early as the beginning of the 20th century, and his language theory of semiotics became the most important source of thoughts in modern semiotics. His original ideas and positioning of semiotics laid the theoretical foundation of modern semiotics. In fact, it is difficult to discuss semiotics without mentioning Saussure's linguistic sign.

5.3. It Promoted Cross-Disciplinary Research

Since the new century, interdisciplinary research has become a trend. Interdisciplinary research has become one of the main approaches to language discipline innovation. The essence of interdisciplinary research is the unity of opposites among disciplines, which promotes the development of language disciplines.[11] Saussure's study of linguistic sign reveals an obvious interdisciplinary color. He placed linguistics in the field of semiotics and proposed that semiotics is a part of social psychology. In view of this, Saussure's linguistic research involves semiotics, psychology, sociology and other disciplines. In addition, Saussure clearly stated that linguistics, as a part of semiotics science, could also be applied to linguistics in the future, which perfectly reflected the idea of interdisciplinary research. Linguistics borrowings a large number of theoretical concepts and research methods from other disciplines, and the basic ideas of Saussure's structuralist theory have also been widely applied to other disciplines in various forms.[12]

5.4. It Drived the Discipline Construction of Linguistic Semiotics

Many scholars directly to the thoughts of semiotics, Saussure's language directly as a subject to study, we think this is biased. Saussure's theory of linguistic semiotics contains rich thoughts of linguistic semiotics. It can even be said that the establishment of this new interdisciplinary discipline must take Saussure's thought of linguistic sign as the core content. However, Saussure's linguistic sign theory is not yet an independent discipline. Linguistic semiotics is an interdisciplinary subject. If we try to define this discipline, it is a subject that studies linguistic sign and linguistic problems from the perspective of semiotics. The establishment of linguistic semiotics is still the responsibility of contemporary linguists and semiotics, aiming to open up a new research field. We believe that linguistic semiotics has quite mature conditions for its establishment, and Saussure's linguistic sign is the top priority of reference.

6. Conclusions

Saussure's exposition of linguistic sign contains abundant thoughts of linguistic semiotics, which embodies his forward-looking view of language. Starting from the *Course in General Linguistics*, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of Saussure's thought of linguistic sign. The connotations of Saussure's linguistic sign include that language is a system of signs, linguistics belongs to semiotics and linguistic sign is the unity of signal and signification. Arbitrariness and linearity are the two basic principles of Saussure's linguistic sign; the arbitrariness and iconicity of linguistic sign is discussed at the level of single linguistic sign and combined linguistic sign respectively, the

iconicity or relative arbitrariness principle cannot shake the position of Saussure's principle of linguistic sign; the linear character of linguistic sign is the foundation of the whole structure of language system. Saussure's linguistic sign has the characteristics of sociality, psychology, systematicness, stabilization, variability and universality, which show the rich thought of linguistic semiotics. The significance of Saussure's linguistic sign is reflected in many aspects. First, it makes clear the object of linguistic research and promotes linguistics to become a real science. In addition, it laid the theoretical foundation of modern semiotics and became the most important source of modern semiotics. It also shows the foresight of interdisciplinary research, which is now in the ascendant. Finally, it drives the discipline construction of linguistic semiotics, which is the most important condition for the establishment of the new interdisciplinary linguistic semiotics.

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