de SAUSSURE, Ferdinand (26 November 1857 – 22 February 1913)

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure received his doctorate from the University of Leipzig in 1880, taught at the École Pratique des Haute Études in Paris (1881-1891) and the Université de Genève (1991-1913). Saussure’s posthumously published *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1915) was reconstructed by scholars from students’ notes taken at Saussure’s lectures between 1906 and 1911. Unlike previous linguists, Saussure focussed here on the *synchronic* (systematic) structure of language rather than the *diachronic* (historical) development of language, though he taught the latter as well. Saussure argued that signs were the arbitrary pairing of signifiers (sound images, or words) and signifieds (concepts), constituting a system in which *tout se tient* (everything connects with everything). (His approach to the sign was anticipated only by C. S. Pierce, founder of *semiology.*) Saussure’s linguistic signs are not “natural,” but arbitrarily gain value (the capacity to act as a signifier) by means of their systematic and habitual differences from one another. The rules of the system as a whole, *langue*, function autonomously, allowing individual performances, or *parole*, within a given language (*langage*)*.* The literary critic Roman Jakobson and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss extended Saussure’s work into a theory of *structuralism* for the human sciences.

Bibliography: John E. Joseph, *Saussure* (Oxford UP, 2012).

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