This Essay is not about Dinosaurs

The fact that any of this makes any sense at all is truly miraculous. It may not seem impressive at first, as after years and years of experience, reading, writing, and comprehending language all become invisible abilities of the human mind. As you read these words your brain is compiling a series of mental images, pairing signifier and signified, guiding you along a mental path to understand the message I am attempting to convey. For a grown adult it takes little to no effort to understand, decipher, and transmit both verbal and written messages. Young children, who are not so experienced, are often told to use “context clues” and to “sound it out” when attempting to decipher the meaning of an unrecognized word, and how to spell it. These strategies suffice most of the time. Yet, things become slightly more complicated when you start adding to ads, affecting effects, or if you happen to know a cellar seller (perhaps even a stellar cellar seller.) Saussure suggests that society has developed a way to navigate through these potentially confusing forms of communication - the human mind subconsciously differentiates between these similar-sounding words by examining signification and value, which exist due to the arbitrarynature of the sign. With the passive use of these skills, not only is the understanding of a single sentence or word achieved, but a greater grasp of language itself.

William Shakespeare, who had the slightest affinity for language, penned the line, “That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” Though he may have been a few hundred years ahead of his time, this infamous quote does a fantastic job of encapsulating the vague notions that Saussure would attempt to convey when discussing *the arbitrary nature of a sign*. Shakespeare and Saussure both make the point that *words* themselves have no meaning. This introduces the idea of s*ignification*, in which a single signifier (the word “rose”) is associated with a single signified (the mental concept of what a rose is) in order to understand what the speaker is referring to when he says “Rose”. Shakespeare coolly expresses this idea above; the individual properties and characteristics of a rose, not its name, allow it to be identified. Saussure noted that it was not the phonetic word itself, but the context in which it is heard that allow for meaning to be accurately determined. A word offers surprisingly little information by itself, as a written word is a mere collection of squiggles, while a spoken word is a conglomeration of pops, squeaks, and grunts. However, Saussure suggests that it is not enough to understand the signification of a word; homonyms alone debunk this entire notion. Taking Saussure’s approach and examining the myriad of elements that surround a single word help reveal its place in the bigger picture. It can be easily visualized like this: It’s easier to imagine what a puzzle looks like with a single piece missing, rather than trying to fathom what a single piece reveals of the entire picture.

A common social understanding accompanies language, as a system of signs that express ideas, is that *this* word means *this* idea. In light of this, the fact remains that a rose is still a rose, even if someone decides to call it a *bara* or a *roza*. This fact alludes to both the arbitrary nature of the sign and *value*, which suggests that a word or sign can be *exchanged* for another word with similar meaning, or *compared* to something else that will clarify its meaning. A crucial part of understanding a word is knowing exactly what it *is not*. Saussure takes this opportunity to point out that words only ever lead to more words - due to the linear nature of the sign, an endless chain of signifiers forms that have no signified. Looking up the word “Bara” in the Japanese dictionary will, unfortunately, only yield more Japanese words, and if one doesn’t know Japanese this definition will be of no help at all. Words, which are merely a portable system of representation, are only useful when an object itself is not present, and must be identified. This calls for the idea of *difference*, that a word both *defers* it’s meaning to the words that comprise it’s dictionary definition, and that in it’s *difference* from other words, meaning can be assumed. In this sense, saying “I love bass” takes on completely different meanings when turned into, “I love bass, music is my life.” or “I love bass, they’re such spectacular and phenomenal creatures.” The word bass, like Shakespeare’s rose, has no inherent meaning, no true purpose. Its function, and anyone’s understanding of it, depends utterly and entirely upon the context in which it is placed.