

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

**Book review:**

**Beata Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology: Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015,  
286 pp.**

Beata Stawarska is a professor of philosophy at the University of Oregon. Her interests are interdisciplinary and encompass areas of contemporary continental philosophy, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, feminist psychology and philosophy of dialogue. This interdisciplinary education certainly influences her work which is deeply integrative – this can be seen in the first Stawarska's book "Between You and I: Dialogical Phenomenology" (2009) as well as in the second "Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology. Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics" (2015). In the former Stawarska derives from sociolinguistics, developmental psychology, philosophy of dialogue and phenomenology, whereas in the latter (which I intend to review in the present article) she undertakes an enterprise to reconcile well-known enemies – structuralism and phenomenology.

The goal that Stawarska sets herself is ambitious – she aims at bringing back the Saussurean doctrine its philosophical complexity and subtlety of which it was deprived by the editorial treatment. To achieve this goal, the academically sedimented structuralist axioms that "go without saying" have to be challenged with recourse to the source materials (Saussure's and his students' notes, some of them recently discovered). In the introduction of the book Stawarska promises

to present a quite new view on Saussure's ideas, which is supposed to emerge as one carefully follows the unfolding of his thought. Saussure's philosophy of language is then no longer to be conceived of as a "set of oppositional and hierarchical pairings" (p.15) (such as synchrony and diachrony, *la langue* and *la parole*, with the former always dominating the latter as a proper subject of study) but rather as a sophisticated account of both consciousness of the speaking subject and *masse parlante* fueling continuous transformation of the language systems.

The book is divided into three main parts consisting of eight chapters and an appendix. In the first part, Stawarska deconstructs the main axioms of the doctrine, exposes its historical oversimplification and redefines areas of interest of the Saussurean programme. The author argues that Saussure understands language not as an closed and autonomic system of signs with meaning defined negatively as difference but as a dynamically changing system fueled by reciprocal and circular relations between its dual aspects (chapters 1 and 3). Therefore, famous Derrida's critique in *Of grammatology* and *Glas* may be misguided by editorial insertions since Derrida and Saussure seem to agree on how a sign is entrained by a language system and sculpted by forces external to language (chapter 2.). In the second part, Stawarska challenges putative contradictions between Saussurean doctrine and phenomenology. Borders which are often claimed to be sharp are becoming fuzzy when one considers Saussurean critique of scientific objectivity as a methodological approach improperly tailored to the subject of study (chapter 4.), his discussion of language phenomena and his view on consciousness of a speaking subject as a *sine qua non* of meaningful language act penetrating systemic dimension of language (chapter 5.) and similarities of Saussurean doctrine to Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenology (chapter 6.). In my opinion, first two parts constitute a core of the book. The third part – focusing on how editorial insertions in the *Course* (chapter 7.) resulted in misinterpretations of Saussure in post-second World War continental philosophy (chapter 8.) – circumstantiates major distortions in contemporary reception of the doctrine and is complementary to the preceding two.

The book is easy to follow since Stawarska spins two parallel narrations, interchangeably pointing to contaminations of Saussurean doctrine by unauthorized insertions in the *Course* and correcting mistakes with appeal to the source materials. The reception of Saussure was canalized by the posthumously published *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916) that was supposed to be a "recast of the lectures on general linguistics that Saussure gave between 1907 and 1909 at the University of Geneva" (p. 5). However, Bally and Sechehaye – the editors of the *Course* – never attended the lectures. Since Saussure's writings on general linguistics were at the time believed to be destroyed by him, they aimed at a reconstruction of his thought on the basis of his preparatory notes from

1894 that they had at their disposal in addition to the students' jottings (p. 202). However, the direct comparison of the students' notes and the official doctrine clearly shows that the editors have ghostwritten or modified large parts of the text. As a result, Saussure's perplexed thought was steered in the direction of scientific objectivity (and in the direction of the editors' views) and pictured as a linearly unfolding philosophical system.

In the first chapter, the author exposes profound misinterpretation at the very beginning of the Saussure's thought – the central notion of arbitrariness of the sign, which is considered in the *Course* to be a property ascribed to the sign itself. The conventionalist notion that there is no internal link between signifier (e.g. sound image) and what is signified (idea of the object in the world) is certainly true but trivial – one could point to the mere fact of existence of different phonetic forms for the same object in different languages to validate it. However, such interpretation actually reinforces the nomenclature view of various arbitrary signifiers fitting common and universal signifieds – with parts of speech mapping onto basic metaphysical categories (nouns -> things; verbs -> events) and names mapping onto metaphysical entities. It seems that it is not the ultimate detachment of the signifying and signified that makes Saussurean doctrine so fresh and interesting; it is rather the notion that they are inextricably intertwined. Languages do not simply consist of different signifiers, but they vary in scope and contours of signifying territories of their signs. The “sheep” is always alive while *mouton* signifies living sheep as well as a dish; the word “sun” may embrace all of the stars or just a single star in our solar system – “meaning emerges through the relation to other signifieds (and signifiers) in the system” (p. 30), e.g. presence and absence or comprehensiveness of neighboring terms. It is the system of forces (associative, contrastive and syntagmatic relations between signs) unique to a given language that determines what signifies what. Arbitrariness cannot thus be confined to the properties of a single sign – it is rather a property of a whole linguistic system; crucially, “not an objective property of closed and autonomous system of signs” (p. 47-48) but rather a property emerging from dynamic revisions following changes in conventional patterns of usage in speaking community made of conscious subjects. The systemic relations are always arbitrary and unique, but not crystalized – changing social linguistic practices continuously transform web of relations between the signs.

Such perspective on Saussurean doctrine renders it consistent with Derrida's thought that “the entrainment of the sign by the language system has always already begun” (p. 71) and, as a result, immune to its famous critique of the former thinker. According to Saussure, there are no signification-secreting external signs that may be inserted into the language system and entrained thereafter; from the very beginning of the process of signification of the sign, it is “compared and contrasted with other signs” (p. 73) and signifies in relation to their phonetic characteristics and associative values. Same rules pertain to onomatopoeias as

well and “even the most seemingly primitive. . . [sounds] like grunts of pleasure or pain signify thanks to their lateral differences within a system of relations” (p. 73). Nevertheless, as Derrida suggests, the possibility of inclusion of the external signs (e.g. new expressions or onomatopoeias), even though always already entrained, threatens the principle of arbitrariness if the language system may be contaminated by external forces. However, as described in the first chapter, Saussure never considers any system of signs to be unchanging – the contamination which is continuous and intrinsic to language is easily reconcilable with the notion of relative arbitrariness, understood as determinacy of a signification of a sign with regard to lateral (and changing) relations with other signs. These systemic constraints are in turn constantly being shaped by changing social patterns of language usage – with new words emerging or frequently used words extending their scope of signification. Forces external to language are indeed always at work. This is also why Saussure criticizes excessive focus on written text in linguistic inquiry – the discipline of writing, with its extensive focus on grammatical correctness and linguistic standards established in a top-down manner, is detached from the living, spoken, conventional language lying at the bottom of incessant systemic changes. Therefore, Saussure’s concern is mainly methodological and does not trail metaphysical commitment to sound, imputed to him by Derrida.

In the third chapter, Stawarska further undoes the structuralist interpretation of Saussurean philosophy as a set of violent and dominant hierarchies. In accordance with source materials, Bally and Sechehaye (the editors of the *Course*) acknowledge the inner duality of linguistics, which manifest in different objects of its interest (*la langue* and *la parole*) and angles to take as a scholar (synchrony and diachrony). Nonetheless, even though the editors admit that these facets of language may be to some extent interdependent, they portray them as radically distinct. To avoid methodological confusion, the reader of the *Course* is advised to pick a slice of language – *la langue* which may be studied as closed and autonomous system amenable to objective scientific inquiry – as the proper object of study. However, Saussure’s view is much more sophisticated. Two facets of language (individual language acts of a speaker and historically sanctioned social conventions) are irreducible and reciprocal – *la parole* is not merely an application of *la langue* in obedience with underlying operative rules, but it is also a generator of identifiable patterns replacing existing but infrequently used forms; these identifiable patterns constitute the basis for subsequent speech acts and so on. This constant sculpting of language escapes immediate sense of language users – we always harness a particular slice of *la langue* to express ourselves; it is a synchronic perspective through which we directly access the meaning and the chain of subsequent linguistic changes cannot be directly grasped by the individual, even though they depend on repetitive individual speech acts. On the other hand, we do have a mediated access to diachrony (dependent on historical knowledge) at our disposal, but historical view loses sight of what a given

language system really is for its users. This inherently heterogenous character of language always escapes us in a matter of greek *aletheia* – when one aspect unveils itself, the other one is covered – but it is to be accounted for and under no circumstances reduced in general linguistics. The duality of language forces us to pick a subjective vantage point – *la langue* and synchrony are paths advised to take steps on, but as every slice of *la langue* results from continuously changing social conventions of usage, it is always linked to the speaking subject exerting her influence. “The synchronic view is privileged and yet this view is partial, and always ambiguously admixed with its other” (p. 103). This lack of firm foundations threatens scientific character of a project and is similar to Hegel’s problem with the beginning in the philosophy – through this comparison Stawarska introduces the reader to the second part of the book, dedicated to relation between Saussure and phenomenology.

The fourth chapter is rather introductory to the second part of the book – it mainly deepens the description of bonds between subjective vantage point and object of study in linguistics. The object of linguistics is necessarily accessed as mediated by consciousness, e.g. a sign always signifies to a particular speaker. A linguist is not an exception from this general principle and so she must approach the linguistic fact not as a self-standing entity but in a way preserving this “primary entanglement” (p. 118). Reduction of this inconvenient but necessary subjective mediation leads to abstractions separated from real language. In Stawarska’s words: “the *thing* category does not. . . fit the study of language, and it is misguided to import the distinctions and terminology modeled on the substance into it”, because there are no preexisting objects in language, prior to consciousness. Is it the subjective criteria determined by the chosen viewpoint that let us reason about identities in the spectrum of linguistic facts. The Saussure’s approach is therefore phenomenological – he denies the possibility of objective science of linguistic facts as devoid of meaning and proposes to return to the objects of linguistics themselves, as experienced by the subject.

In the beginning of the fifth chapter, roots of Saussurean philosophy are traced back to Polish linguists Kruszewski and Baudouin de Courtenay who reject the possibility of linguistics based on inductive method (e.g. comparisons of etymologies of words in different languages) and generalizations as potentially misleading and arbitrary. To grasp a totality of language, one must undertake a phenomenological task and isolate a set of *a priori* principles (e.g. phonetic and morphological rules) governing linguistic phenomena extracted from the consciously experienced language happening “before our eyes” (p.124). These laws should organize empirical research instead of being derived from the data. Saussure himself admits that the two Polish linguists were influential to his own work (p. 121-122). He points to a category of “phenomenon” as a proper one in the field of linguistics, since “language is indissociable from particular language acts, as performed by the speakers” (p. 126). It is the consciousness of a speaker

where a sign is related to a particular corresponding idea and, therefore, it forms a necessary precondition for language and meaning. However, the speaking subject is not a self-standing origin of meaning since it is constrained by socially transmitted linguistic patterns; therefore, it is not simply a transcendental *ego* – a someone to whom a sign signs – that constitutes the condition of possibility of a language. It is a social being compromising his mind with an antecedent, imposed system of signs. In Stawarska's words: "the individual is. . . dethroned in favor of the social situation, without abandoning the standpoint of consciousness in the process" (p. 128). Therefore, Saussure extends the meaning of a term *phenomenon* in language from a state (corresponding to a synchronic axis) to an event (corresponding to a diachronic axis), with *masse parlante* being the proper subject of a rule-governed phenomena unfolding in time, and states and events inextricably intertwined according to the principle of intrinsic duality of language.

But what are the invariant rules governing the phenomenon of language that may be described within the field of linguistics? Saussure points to the deep generative potential of any language in which new forms may emerge on the basis of forces (rules, patterns, regularities) present in a given system. Deep grammar embraces acceptable grammatical and syntagmatic forms that are currently sanctioned by the speaking community as well as unacceptable linguistic forms complying to the analogous operative rules. Analogical innovation – e.g. incorrect generalizations like lead (past tense = led) -> read (past tense = red) – is the lens through which we can look at this hidden fecundity of language and it is thus the source of the deepest insights on systemic forces organizing our everyday speech. Crucially, analogy depends both on pre-reflective combination of various grammatical or syntagmatic rules when "subject is animated by forces not of her own making" (p. 146) and the consciousness of the speaker that binds forces intrinsic to language and gives birth to analogical innovation subsequently penetrating the systemic organization of language. Words are not divided into objective parts like prefix, stem and suffix but these parts are recognized in the consciousness of the language user who creatively (although not necessarily reflectively, since the subject is always to some extent "guided" and "spoken" by the language) juggles with them, giving birth to innovative utterances. Analogy is a driving wheel of the language – understanding of an analogy as anomaly is superficial and results from succumbing to the idol of linguistic correctness. Saussure's view on language is quite the opposite – capability of endless revisions and reappropriations as well as of abandonment of the old forms may be understood as a measure of a success of a language that is creatively handled by its users.

In the sixth chapter, Stawarska discusses relations between Saussure's thought and the most prominent phenomenologists such as Hegel, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Saussure's philosophy particularly resemble Hegel's notion of "total science" which goal is to account "not. . . [for] objects alone, but. . . the subject and the pursuit of knowledge as well" (p. 155). In Hegel's philosophy, consciousness

must transcend its naïve attitude towards objects which are initially perceived as external. This process entails gradual progression where being is initially taken as immediacy (simple sensory givens), then as multiple determinacy of singular things and as a relational system of forces between experiential shapes within a unified system. Finally, consciousness reaches a metastance of absolute knowing in which it recognizes that subjective attitude is structurally paired with metaphysical commitment about objects and may then retroactively reflect on its own epistemological stances. Saussure's approach to language parallels Hegel's notion of science in that in linguistics one must transcend naïve attitude towards meaning as directly given in individual signs towards understanding of language as a system where "meaning of each sign is conditioned by contrastive, associative and syntagmatic relations to other signs" (p. 164) and these meanings are established by mind's capability to differentiate. Linguistics must acknowledge this basic unity of consciousness and the object of study (language that does not cease to signify for a scholar while being studied) to be genuinely "general".

Saussure's philosophy shows particularly striking similarity to Hegel's phenomenology, but it is not at odds with Husserlian philosophy either. The popular view that these philosophies are discrepant results from dominant reception of phenomenology as a transcendental and idealist project where "meaning [is] regarded exclusively in terms of subjective constitution by consciousness" (p. 180). It is intuitive that such project cannot be reconciled with systemic view on language constraining freedom of subjective constitution. However, phenomenology may be understood as a descriptive method that aims at discovering the structure of invariants in the studied phenomenon. Language, as a phenomenon succumbing to the structural analysis, may be studied within the field of phenomenology. "An exemplar of working at the intersection of subjective and systemic understanding of meaning and language" (p. 172) may be found in Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* in which he analyses how structural (grammatical) laws in language determine semantic and grammatical categories that may fulfill independent meanings. These laws constrain intentional freedom of binding terms into meaningful sentences, with this "unfreedom" itself being the essential rule of language. Husserl's ideas were then picked up by Roman Jakobson (pioneer of structural analysis of language in the East, one of the few scholars who acknowledged philosophical subtlety of Saussure's thought) who described language as a "layered phenomenon" (p. 178) with various degrees of subject's freedom appertaining to the speaking subject (with no individual freedom at the lowest level of phonemes to limited freedoms of binding phonemes to neologisms and words to novel expressions). The last section of the sixth chapter of the book is then devoted to the treatment of Merleau-Ponty's reading of the *Course*. The author of *Phenomenology of perception* emphasizes the necessity of a unified perspective on language in which it is to be grasped as a socially sanctioned system of meanings sustained and modified by repetitive individual

acts of speech. Merleau-Ponty rehabilitates the speech (sidelined in the *Course*) and proposes that approach to language must be “anthropological” in that one has to make himself familiar to language and “live” inside it to fully understand what it is for a community of speaking subjects.

Stawarska’s arguments are clear and deeply convincing. This is particularly valuable in the field of phenomenology which frequently sacrifices clarity of thought on the altar of intellectual sophistication. At certain passages of the book, she juggles with language almost in a postmodernistic manner, but it seems to serve her goal – precise reconstruction of Saussure’s thought – rather than simple intellectual recreation. The richness of references is also worth mentioning – the reader is provided with excerpts of the relevant source materials as well as with historical reconstructions of events in academic politics that led to the dominant reception and even testimonies of Bally’s personal struggle with language being the psychoanalytic root cause of his editorial insertions.

The projects of total science including the subject and accounting for the experiential nature of the studied phenomena, although impressively comprehensive, usually remain at the project stage. As a psychologist, I am particularly interested in whether Saussure’s subtle philosophy may guide contemporary empirical research in the field of psychology of language and linguistics. The contemporary methods of analysis of meaning inspired, among others, by the simplified reading of Saussure’s works include analyses of semantic fields or spaces of words – e.g. Hyperspace Analogue to Language (Lund & Burgess, 1996); CoAls (Riordan and Jones, 2011) or BEAGLE (Jones and Mewhort, 2007). Semantic field is defined as a set of terms occurring jointly with a given word. Analyzed words are represented as localizations in multidimensional semantic space with words that are surrounded by similar terms occupying close localizations. These words are understood as having parallel meaning since they form parallel syntagmatic and grammatical relations with other signs within the language system. Therefore, they are involved in a web of analogous systemic relations, with vectors of their associative forces pointing in similar directions in the multidimensional space of language. However, such methods are not sufficient to grasp the totality of language. The reconceptualization of Saussure’s view on language as a constantly evolving system of signs points to the necessity of a constant synchronic update of corpora of text (*la parole* which is transcribed or relocated to the realm of Internet) providing material for analysis. Only then the living character of language will emerge in diachrony of circular relations between changing patterns of speech and underlying systemic relations in language, providing deep insights (that would potentially lead to the description of general laws) on how meanings evolve. This interdisciplinary project would require involvement of researchers from various disciplines – therefore, I believe that Stawarska’s book is a valuable read not only for philosophers but for ethnologists, psychologists dealing with language and cognitive scientists alike.



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