

Han Zewei
Ningxia Normal University
Gu Yuan, Ning Xia, China
hanzewei2022@163.com

Speculation on Saussure's views of language: Contemporary linguistics calls for Saussure

Abstract

Ferdinand de Saussure was not only a linguist but also a philosopher of language. This paper aims to discuss in detail the contemporary value of Saussure's linguistic contribution and the research value of speech activities. Through the perspective of the philosophy of language, we can have a more in-depth analysis and a more comprehensive understanding of Saussure's view of language. Saussure was the founder of cross-disciplinary approach to linguistics that marked a new era in its development. In his concept, Saussure distinguished between the language system of symbol-like units, language facts and language ability, synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics, external linguistics and internal linguistics. Viewing internal elements of the language system as independent from the world, he focused on the formal relationships between elements of that system. The core part in Saussure's linguistic concept is "value" as far as it determines the inherent function of symbols in language as a valuable system of symbols. After Saussure, modern linguistics developed vigorously with a number of linguistic schools claiming Saussure as their predecessor. Up to now, few researchers have gone beyond Saussure's linguistic model to establish a new linguistic approach.

Ключевые слова: philosophy of language, structuralism, cross-disciplinary approach, language system, symbol-like unit, language fact, game of chess metaphor

© Han Z. 2025

Для цитирования: Han, Z. (2025). Speculation on Saussure's views of language: Contemporary linguistics calls for Saussure // Теоретическая и прикладная лингвистика. 2025. Вып. 11, № 2. С. 154–165. <https://doi.org/10.22250/24107190-2025-11-2-154>

Хань Цзэвэй
Нинсянский педагогический университет
г. Гуоянь, Нинся, Китайская Народная Республика
hanzewei2022@163.com

Размышления о взглядах Соссюра на язык: современная парадигма нуждается в Соссюре

Аннотация

Фердинанд де Соссюр был не только лингвистом но философом в области языкознания. Цель данной статьи – детально представить значимость вклада Соссюра для современной лингвистики в целом и для исследований речевой деятельности – в частности. Именно благодаря рассмотрению языка с философского ракурса мы можем глубже понять лингвистические идеи Соссюра как целостную систему взглядов на то, что такое язык. Соссюр стал основателем междисциплинарного подхода, ознаменовавшего начало новой эры в развитии лингвистики. В рамках своей концепции, Соссюр разграничивал языковую систему, речь, представленную языковыми фактами, и языковую способность, а также синхронную и диахроническую лингвистику, внутреннюю и внешнюю лингвистику. Рассматривая внутренние элементы языковой системы как независимые от внешнего мира, он сконцентрировал своё внимание на формальных отноше-

ниях между ними. Центральной идеей лингвистической концепции Соссюра является понятие значимости, поскольку оно определяет функцию, изначально присущую языковым знакам – образовывать систему значимых единиц. Появление концепции Соссюра стало мощным толчком к развитию современной лингвистики и возникновению целого ряда лингвистических школ, считающих Соссюра своим предшественником. Мало кому из современных лингвистов удалось превзойти Соссюра в создании языковой модели, претендующей на новый лингвистический подход.

Keywords: философия языка, структурализм, междисциплинарный подход, языковая система, знаковая единица, языковой факт, метафора игры в шахматы

© Хань Ц. 2025

Для цитирования: Han Z. Speculation on Saussure's views of language: Contemporary linguistics calls for Saussure // Теоретическая и прикладная лингвистика. 2025. Вып. 11, № 2. С. 154–165. <https://doi.org/10.22250/24107190-2025-11-2-154>

1. Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure is an important founder of modern linguistics and one of the pioneers of structuralism. He is known as the father of modern linguistics and the originator of structuralism. Although he was a linguist, his concept was a part of new humanities that always take shape with considerable philosophical thought. As the founder of one of the most important new humanities, his influence on the philosophy of language and general philosophical thinking is very extensive and profound. He probably influenced the philosophers of the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition more than the analytic tradition. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* is a purely linguistic work, but it influenced almost the entire generation of later structuralist and post-structuralist French philosophers. Therefore, we can think of him not only as a linguist but also as a philosopher of language. Only from the angle of the philosophy of language can we make a deeper analysis and a more comprehensive understanding of Saussure's thought.

Saussure did not publish many papers during his lifetime, but the few that he did were influential. In 1907–1911 he taught general linguistics for three semesters at the University of Geneva. After his death in 1913, his students and colleagues compiled the book *Course in General Linguistics* based on several lecture notes. Saussure was not only stingy about publishing, but also left very few notes of his own. Therefore, it was extremely difficult to edit this book. There were many repeated contents in the lectures during the three semesters, as well as many different and even inconsistent contents. The editor combined and sorted them into one book, finally becoming a world-famous book. In our age of far too much emphasis on books, the paucity of Saussure's writings during his lifetime seems incomprehensible. But in fact, many great thinkers did not leave any final works during their lifetime. When it comes to Confucius, Socrates, Wittgenstein and Aristotle, their major works were compiled by their students. We can imagine that they are constantly attracted by broader and deeper ideas, and their thoughts are always in a highly active state of creation, with little time to stop and finalize them. It is a blessing for us, later generations, to be able to read these compiled works, but we were not born in the prosperous age and cannot directly listen to the explorations of those think-tanks in the ideological scene. We can only understand their thoughts through their works, but it makes people feel disappointed.

2. The contemporary value of Saussure's views of language

Saussure used the basic principles of philosophical dualism and philosophy of language to establish a series of dichotomous oppositions in language theory: Langue vs.

parole¹; synchronic linguistics vs. diachronic linguistics; internal linguistics vs. external linguistics; syntagmatic vs. paradigmatic and signifier vs. signified. He severely criticized historical-comparative linguistics based on positivism and mechanical materialism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he created a new era of modern linguistics, pushed language research to a new stage making it a real science.

From the historical perspective of the development of linguistics, the 20th century was an important stage in the rise and development of linguistics. It is generally believed that the publication of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in the first half of the 20th century marked the epochal status of modern linguistics, and Saussure is also considered the founder of modern linguistics. However, many colleagues in the field of linguistics fail to deeply understand Saussure from the perspective of the philosophy of language (including the Marxist philosophy of language). Therefore, they do not fully understand the origin and relationship between him and the philosophy of language. It is inevitable that they have an insufficient understanding of Saussure's philosophical thoughts. For example, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* [Volosinov, 1930] and *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* [Lecerle, 2006], Saussure's philosophy of language is discussed in detail, and it is harshly criticized with reference to the basic principles of Marxism. Saussure was even regarded as an important representative of the second trend of thought in the philosophy of language by [Volosinov, 1930, p. 57] who listed Saussure's four basic views as follows:

- (1) Language is a stable, unified formal system that is pre-existing for individuals;
- (2) Language rules are the connection relationships of tokens in a specific and closed language system;
- (3) This connection has nothing to do with conscious values (humanities, arts, cognition, etc.);
- (4) The individual act of speaking is merely an accidental refraction and variation of the system and a simple deformation of the normatively identical form.

Six main principles of "mainstream philosophy of language", according to [Lecerle, 2006, pp. 67–72], include: (1) Principle of Immanence; (2) Principle of Functionality; (3) Principle of Transparency; (4) Principle of Ideality; (5) Principle of Systematicity; (6) Principle of Synchrony. We can see that, except for (2) and (3), the other four principles are obviously derived from Saussure.

This seems to be evident from Saussure's most important contribution to linguistics. Saussure's main contributions can be listed as follows:

1) Distinguish between langue¹ and parole. Saussure distinguished the language system latent in the brains of members of a language community from actual language phenomena, calling them *l a n g u e* and *p a r o l e* respectively. He believes that language is a system composed of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Language is social and primary while, speech is personal, subordinate and secondary. At the same time, Saussure also pointed out that langue and parole are closely related to each other. The establishment of langue requires parole, and the understanding of parole requires langue.

2) Language is a system of symbols. Saussure believed that language is a system composed of symbols that express ideas. The value of language symbols depends on the systematic rules between symbols. Language is a form, not an entity.

3) Distinguish between synchronic linguistics and diachronic linguistics. Saussure believed that language is a valuable system. Any science that studies value must distinguish between synchronic methods and diachronic methods, and the research object must be placed on a simultaneous axis or a continuous axis for study.

¹ The "langue" here is not the language we usually talk about but the metaphysical system he constructed. In this system, there are neither sentences nor words in the true sense, and only abstract relationships exist. Saussure regards this "langue" as a real existence and puts it above speech clearly reflecting the tendency of Western metaphysical realism.

4) Distinguish between external linguistics and internal linguistics. Saussure believed that language is a system composed of symbols, and the value of symbols depends on the relationship between symbols. Everything related to the language system and rules is internal, and is called ontological linguistics, microlinguistics or internal linguistics while, everything that has nothing to do with language system and rules is external and is called macrolinguistics, marginal linguistics or external linguistics.

Saussure's above-mentioned linguistic thoughts had a huge impact on the subsequent research and development of linguistics and the formation of related comprehensive and cross-disciplinary fields pushing the study of linguistics to a new stage. The publication of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* marked the arrival of the modern era of linguistics. Saussure is therefore considered the founder of modern linguistics.

As we all know, Saussure distinguished the language system latent in the brains of language community members from the language phenomena actually used calling them *langue* and *parole* respectively. "Language is a system that only knows its own inherent order. Comparing it with chess will make people feel better. Here, it is easier to distinguish what is external and what is internal. The spread of chess from Persia to Europe is an external fact, whereas everything related to systems and rules is internal" [Saussure, 1999, p. 46].

Saussure's theory of distinguishing *langue* and *parole* established the disciplinary status of linguistics and clarified the real object of linguistic research: "The only real object of linguistics is language and the study of language for its own sake" [Saussure, 1999, p. 323]. Language is a system of symbols, and within the language system, the symbols of language are not equal to the facts of language. Language symbols are the constituent elements of the language system. The language system is the whole composed of all elements of the system. The value of language symbols depends on the systematic relationship between symbols and is determined by the mutual relationship between symbols. Saussure exploits the chess metaphor again to explain it: "The state of playing chess is comparable to the state of language. The respective value of the chess pieces is determined by their position on the chessboard. Likewise, in language, each element has its value by virtue of its opposition to other elements" [Saussure, 1999, p. 128]; "Value is also first determined by the unchanging rules, that is, the rules of chess, which already exist between chess games and continue to exist after each chess move is played. Language also has these kinds of rules that exist forever once recognized which are the eternal rules of semiotics" [Saussure, 1999, p. 28].

"Value" is the core part in Saussure's linguistic concept as far as it determines the function of symbols in language as a valuable system of symbols. This function is inherent within the system being an eternal function of the structure. The stability of the system structure reflects the synchronicity of its operation while the closure of the system structure reflects the exclusivity of the system. The fact of language is the product of various speech activities. It is the result of the speaker's use of language rules to express personal will and intelligent behavior. It is a personal, temporary, heterogeneous and external phenomenon of the language system. Language is a symbolic system that is homogeneous and it exhibits synchronic and constancy characteristics over time. Everything outside the system is personal and heterogeneous exhibiting diachronic patterns in time. Although the system and everything outside the system are inextricably linked being prerequisites for each other, from a historical perspective, *parole* precedes *langue*. However, from a research perspective, their clear distinction is crucial as it laid the foundation of modern linguistics and opened up a new era of linguistic research.

The approach to language as system of symbols led to the rise and rapid development of structural linguistics later split into several branches and schools. The distinction between the internal elements of the system and its external elements promoted the emergence of ontological linguistics and external linguistics. The distinction between the synchronic features of the system

and the diachronic features of the facts freezes the study of language in time on the cross between the horizontal synchronic dimension and the vertical diachronic dimension. “Linguists are especially required to note this distinction; for language is a pure value system that does not depend on anything but the temporary status of its elements” [Saussure, 1999, p. 118]. “The first thing that strikes us when we study the facts of language is that for the speaker their temporal succession does not exist” [Saussure, 1999, p. 120].

The temporal discreteness of linguistic facts determines their dynamics and evolution. Saussure believed that there is no direct connection between diachronic dynamic facts and synchronic static structures. “It would therefore be utopian to combine such irreconcilable facts in a single discipline. In the diachronic perspective, one is dealing with phenomena that have nothing to do with the system, although these phenomena constrain the system” [Saussure, 1999, p. 125].

As [Xu, 2001, p. 334] put it, “According to many philosophers of language, language has no relationship with the world, even an indirect relationship. It is a free and self-sufficient system, and philosophy operates within this system. Whether a proposition expressed in language is true or not, it has nothing to do with the world and is only determined by the internal rules of language. Russell and the early Wittgenstein believed that we can know the structure of the world by analyzing the structure of language. The “language is a free and self-sufficient system” mentioned here is based on Saussure’s theory of internal referentiality of language which mainly focuses on its internal elements and the formal relationships between elements. Saussure believed that language is a system composed of symbols, and the value of symbols depends on the relationship between symbols. Everything related to the language system and rules is internal, and it is called ontological linguistics (=microlinguistics or internal linguistics) while everything that has nothing to do with language systems and rules is external, and it is called macrolinguistics (=peripheral linguistics or external linguistics). There are echoes here not only of the European philosophical tradition but also of analytic philosophies such as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein who focused on analyzing the language system from within.

3. The research value of Saussure’s speech activities

If linguistic facts are excluded from language, then all that remains in language are symbols and the various relationships between them, the so-called formal expressions and formal contents. This kind of linguistics is completely algebraic in nature. The core idea that “the only real object of linguistics is language and the study of language for its own sake” contrasts the structural nature of the system with the discrete nature of linguistic facts, the internal phenomena with the external phenomena, the synchronic characteristics with the diachronic characteristics bringing all the disciplines related to linguistics together around linguistics and turning linguistics into an exact science. This is an extremely important methodological revelation that separates language systems from language facts, forming an opposition between static and dynamic, synchronic and diachronic and thus, forming two parallel research systems. This design idea is a great initiative, “Language is a system and it only knows its own inherent order [Saussure, 1999, p. 46] ... The state of playing chess is comparable to the state of language. The respective value of the pieces is determined by their position on the board [Saussure, 1999, p. 128] ... I replace wooden chess pieces with ivory chess pieces. This change is insignificant to the system; but if I reduce or increase the number of chess pieces, then this change will deeply affect chess skills” [Saussure, 1999, p. 46].

There are different views on Saussure’s comparison of language to the game of chess. For example, Jakobson believes that “the traditional comparison of language to a game of chess must not be overestimated. By mutual agreement, the chess players can replace a lost piece with anything while no component of the language system can be substituted arbitrarily

and the alternatives are far from trivial. Not only the rules of chess but also the rules of substitution condition the structure of language, for language becomes governed by laws of allegory and incompatibility, which are immutable” [Jacobson, 2001, p. 76]. What Jakobson said is very true, but how to view (understand) Saussure’s “rules of chess” and Jakobson’s “alternatives” is actually a question of how to view “language as a symbolic system”.

Saussure believed that language is a system of symbols. Language symbols are the constituent elements of the system. Each element has its value because of its opposition to other elements. Language symbols are not just linguistic facts. Language symbols are first of all the constituent elements of the system. The symbols that enter the system are symbols that are separated from the specific language environment and are symbols of general nature and universal significance. The value of the symbols in the system is determined by the constituent elements of the system and the interrelationships between the various elements. This system represents language. The symbol in the language system is an algebraic expression, like “ $1+1=2$ ” which has only value but no meaning. Only through the operation of speech activities, language enters the external language system and brings linguistic facts into the language system, only then it can produce speech products with practical significance.

It is generally believed that Saussure distinguished language phenomena into *langue* and *parole*. For example, “Saussure distinguished the language system latent in the mind of the language group from the actual language phenomenon calling them *langue* and *parole* respectively. *Parole* is a corpus that can be directly observed, and *langue* is the vocabulary, grammar and phonetic system that language users acquire through learning in society making it the basis for their own use and understanding of the language [Xing Fuyi, Wu Zhenguo, 2002, p. 52]. Few people pay attention to *langue*. Strictly speaking, Saussure divided the language phenomenon into three different parts: *langue*, *parole* and *langage*. These three parts are interrelated and different from each other. *Langue* is social, and *parole* is personal. To connect the personal and the social, there must be *langage* to achieve language communication. “*Langage* has a personal side and a social side; without one side it is impossible to conceive of the other side. At any time, *langage* contains both an established system and an evolution being a product of the current system and the past. At first glance, it seems simple to distinguish the system from its history and its current state from its past state. In fact, the two are so closely related that it is difficult to separate them cleanly” [Saussure, 1999, p. 29]. This is the aspect of their connection, because *langue* is “a grammatical connection latent in the minds of a group of people” [Saussure, 1999, p. 35], and it is social while *parole* “is the sum total of what people say”, including:

- (a) A combination of individuals subject to the will of the speaker,
- (b) What is necessary to realize these combinations is also an articulatory act related to the will.

For all these reasons, it is simply an illusion to unite *langue* and *parole* in a single point of view. The totality of *langage* cannot be known because it is not homogeneous. This is the first fork in the road we encounter when building a theory of language. We cannot take both paths at the same time, we must choose and they should be treated separately [Saussure, 1999, p. 42].

Although *langage* and *parole* are heterogeneous, they are not the same thing. “*Parole* is a corpus that can be directly observed” [Xing, 2002, p. 52]. *Langage* is an individual’s behavior of verbal communication which is an active connection between an individual’s systematic language tools and discrete language facts. It is an active, intelligent, complex and purposeful behavior. Only through such behavior can the language system play its functional role and produce speech products with practical significance. “*Langage* is multi-faceted and complex in nature, spanning physical, physiological and psychological fields at the same time. It also belongs to the personal field and the social field. We cannot classify it into any category

of humanistic facts, because we don't know how to sort out its unity" [Saussure, 1999, p. 30]. "To find the language equivalent of the total language, one must carefully examine the individual actions from which the speech cycle can be reconstructed. This action must involve at least two people: this is the minimum number to make the cycle complete" [Saussure, 1999, p. 32].

Langue is a relatively closed system and belongs to internal linguistics. While, parole is open and belongs to external linguistics. There is no direct connection between them. Although language is also personal, it is the only channel for the connection between langue and parole. Only through language can it be possible to connect langue and parole, play the role of language tools and process language facts (corpus) into speech products. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish language from "parole". Only language with human participation can generate speech products. If language, language facts (corpus) and speech products are collectively referred to as parole, there will be many difficult-to-speak words. As a clear phenomenon, the human factor in language is of decisive significance, as it embodies human will. "Parole is an individual's will and intelligent behavior where we should distinguish: (1) the combinations by which the speaker uses the rules of language to express his personal thoughts; (2) the psychological and physical mechanisms that make it possible for him to express these combinations" [Saussure, 1999, p. 35]. Fig. 1 illustrates the detailed relationship between langue, parole and language².

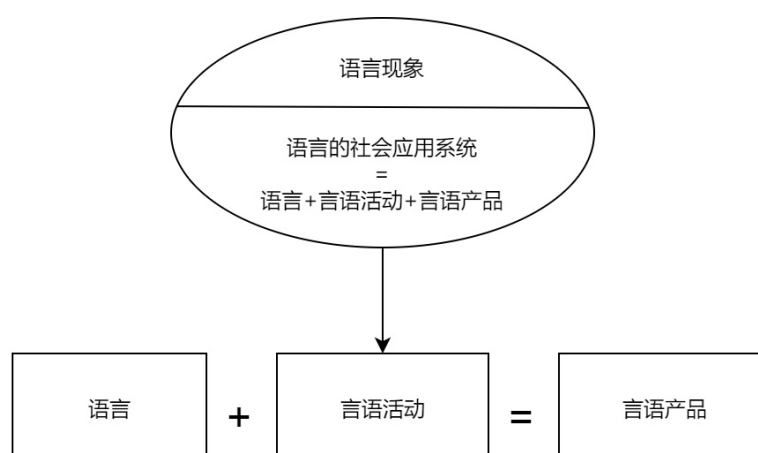


Figure 1. Relationship between langue, parole and language

Langue / parole is a useful pair of distinctions. However, Saussure is sometimes a bit hasty and simply assigning the distinctions to different natures. For example, when Zhang San and Li Si say "I", they refer to different people but the meaning of the word "I" remains the same. When Zhang San and Li Si pronounce a certain word differently, it is still the same word, in other words, it remains equal to itself. The two are separate types of identity and difference.

Roy Harris pointed out that Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was a "Copernican revolution" in linguistic thought, and that the language turn in Western philosophy should have preceded Saussure. After Saussure, people's views of language underwent a fundamental change. Language no longer appears in front of people as a tool. Language as an ontology becomes the first element of philosophy.

² 语言现象: Language phenomena

语言的社会应用系统: Social application system of language

语言: Language

言语活动: Language

言语产品: Speech products

4. The academic value of the debate over opinions

Saussure compared language to an algebra. He believed that “language can be said to be an algebra with only complex terms” [Saussure, 1999, p. 169]. The value of language symbols is determined by the mutual relationship between them. If the value of language symbols is also a kind of meaning, it is also a structural meaning. The so-called structural meaning is actually the syntactic relationship marked by certain formal means. Structural meaning corresponds to lexical meaning. The so-called lexical meaning refers to the meaning of isolated words recorded in the dictionary. A word is a part of the vocabulary system. A word often has not only one meaning but only one value. It is because “the value of a word is not determined by the relationship between the objective objects that mark it” [Feng, 1999, p. 25]. Saussure compared the state of language to the state of playing chess. It is the value of language symbols that is determined by the mutual relationship between symbols. For example, “Is a pawn itself an element of chess? Of course not. Because only by virtue of its pure materiality, apart from its position on the chess board and other conditions for playing chess, it does not matter to the player who plays chess. It is meaningless. Only when it is covered with its own value and integrated with this value can it become a realistic and concrete element” [Saussure, 1999, p. 155]. Saussure regarded the linguistic symbol system as a closed system, a value system, and an algebra.

Jacobson’s “alternatives” should be the language in operation. Only human intelligence can realize the alternatives. It is precisely because of human intelligent choice in language that the language system can be connected with the external real world. The linguistic system Jacobson refers to here is not entirely equivalent to Saussure’s linguistic system, “because the linguistic components are bound by allegorical laws and incompatible laws, which cannot be changed” [Jacobson, 2001, p. 76]. We know that the “law of implication” and “the law of incompatibility” are deep implicit laws, which themselves do not belong to the language system mentioned by Saussure. Saussure believed that the French word “mouton” could have the same meaning as the English word “sheep”, but they did not have the same value. There are several reasons for this, not least that when we are talking about a piece of lamb cooked and brought to the table, English says “mutton”, not “sheep”. The difference in value between the English “sheep” and the French “mouton” is that the English word has another element besides “sheep”, but this is not the case with the French word [Saussure, 1999, p. 161]. The language system described by Saussure is a system of symbols, a value system, a kind of algebra with complex terms, and belongs to internal linguistics. However, the language system mentioned by Jacobson is not the same as the language system mentioned by Saussure. The language system mentioned by Jacobson is external linguistics based on internal linguistics. He emphasizes the connection and research on the function, society, pragmatics, communication and other basic aspects of language (see *Translation Notes in The Collected Works of Jacobson*, 79). He believes that synchrony and diachrony, static and dynamic relationships are dialectical. “In fact, synchrony is definitely not static. Changes constantly occur and are part of synchrony. True synchronicity is dynamic. Static synchrony is an abstraction that may be useful for specific purposes in the study of language. However, a detailed and true synchronic description of language must always consider the dynamic nature of language. The idea that language is a single, monolithic system is an oversimplification. Language is a system of systems and a total code containing multiple sub-codes” [Jacobson, 2001, p. 81].

According to Jacobson’s views on “playing chess” and “alternatives”, it can be seen that he not only attaches great importance to the research of internal linguistics but also pays more attention to the research of external linguistics. He not only pays attention to discovering the constants of the signifier but also pays more attention to discovering the variables of the

signifier. He believes, “When studying symbols, how can we discover the invariants in the field of signifier and meanwhile the invariants in the field of signified? From a linguistic perspective, the fundamental difference between the signifier and the signified is that the signifier must be perceptible, while the signified can be translated” [Jacobson, 2001, p. 80]. Jacobson’s view on the duality of symbols is an extremely important methodological revelation. Language symbols are the link between the signifier and the signified. The signifier represents one side, indicating the system. And the signified represents the other side, indicating the application. Language is a system of symbols. The nature of symbols in the system is an invariant (constant). The number of symbols is determined. The value of symbols is determined by their mutual relationship, which is synchronic in time and does not change due to the change (passage) of time. Therefore, the state of language is equivalent to the state of playing chess. Replacing wooden chess pieces with ivory chess pieces is irrelevant to the system. However, language is people’s main communication tool. In interlingual communication, when one language is converted into another language, or several languages, the number, nature, and mutual relationships of the interlingual system members will change differently. Therefore, the invariant properties of system symbols are only relative. As Jacobson said, “As long as we do not clarify the nature of the basic invariants, we cannot clarify the variables because all variables are related to invariants” [Jacobson, 2001, p. 80]. Language is a system composed of multiple subsystems. The signifier has the individual characteristics of language. The discovery of invariants in the field of signifiers provides important inspiration for the ontology research of contemporary linguistics, and it is an important task of contemporary linguistics to make signifier perceptible. The signified is a kind of reality, a formal representation of reality, and the translatability of the signified prompts us to find invariants in the signified field and to seek common factors between linguistic facts and between languages. Relative to the signifier, the signified has the common characteristics of language, and exploring the invariants of the signified domain is an important task in the study of linguistic facts and applied studies in contemporary linguistics. The translatability of language symbols suggests that we seek common factors in the signified domain, which are semantic invariants. Only in this way can we study the distribution of semantic problems, making the study of “meaning” a real linguistic problem and a core part of linguistic research. Only when we clearly divide the research object of signifier and the research object of signified, clarify the encoding mode of researchers and the decoding mode of observers, determine our research methodology orientation, and clarify what is internal and what is external, many problems in the description system of linguistics and the construction system of language theory will become clearer. However, the observer’s observation method and observation perspective are not only the two orientations of encoding mode (from concept to form) and decoding mode (from form to concept) but also the process of encoding and decoding. The “process” involves the subjective intelligence of the speaker and the choice of individuality and commonality, which is a link that cannot be ignored in linguistic research, otherwise, we cannot determine our research object. However, these two methods of observation are not exhaustive. The important process of “recoding” should also be considered. “Recoding” is the interpretation of one language in another language, or of one text in another. One type of code or subcode is translated into another type of code or subcode. This is a very illuminating methodological question because translation is one of the most fundamental and increasingly important activities in linguistics. Therefore, the methodology of translation and the coherent analysis of translation have a place on the calendar of contemporary theoretical and applied linguistics” [Jacobson, 2001, p. 84]. The signified is relative to a linguistic fact, and the linguistic facts within and between languages are the embodiment of reality and have diachronic characteristics. The search for invariant semantics

in the signified field is the foundation, and the study of semantic distribution characteristics is an important topic in contemporary linguistics. The duality of language symbols determines the immutability and variability of signifier and signified. From the point of view of modern linguistics, language symbols are from internal linguistics to external linguistics, from static to dynamic, and all “changes” are related to “invariance”. Only by thoroughly clarifying the essence of “invariance” can “changes” be explained more clearly. Saussure’s distinction between internal and external linguistics, synchronic and diachronic linguistics is a great initiative, although there are different views on this distinction (e.g. [Jacobson, 2001, p. 80]). Inside and outside and static and dynamic are a pair of mutual premise of two objects. We can not only see the separation of inside and outside, static and dynamic sides but ignore the side of their mutual connection. We can not only pay attention to the study of external and dynamic but ignore the role of internal and static. Saussure also stressed that in order for parole to be understood and to produce all its effects, there must be langue. “Langue and parole are interwoven. Langue is both a tool of parole and a product of parole. However, that doesn’t make them two absolutely different things” [Saussure, 1999, p. 41].

At the system level, language symbols show static characteristics, and there are upper and lower inclusive relations or parallel relations among the subsystems of the system. Depending on the precision of the description, the purpose of the description and the degree of differentiation of the system are also different. For example, lexical systems, syntactic systems, lexical systems, and even valency systems with certain (class) keywords as descriptive objects, etc. The symbol system is a rule system of invariants, which is a kind of algebraic formula from a macroscopic point of view. The invariants are mainly embodied in the quantitative structure of the elements and the interdependent relationship structure. There are a series of subsystems in the upper and lower relations and the left and right relations of the language symbol system. The language can be described as a system of another system, a total code system containing multiple and multi-level subcodes. These diverse code systems do not come together mechanically by accident but are complex systems of rules governed by a basic subcode. What is the basic invariant nature of language symbols? If we cannot answer this question correctly, we cannot explain its variables because all variables in language are most associated with invariance. Language symbols exist directly, and variables and invariants in language have ontological properties. The science of language is different from the natural sciences, although in recent years there have been many more and more meaningful contacts between linguistics and the natural sciences and fruitful research results have been achieved. However, the research method of linguistics is different from that of natural science. Linguistics cannot take the symbol system and the constructed model as the real research object. For natural science, a symbol is a scientific tool. While for linguistics, symbol is not only a scientific tool and symbol should first become the real research object of linguistics. The language symbol is materialized, and the ontology of language symbols is studied. First, the invariant nature of the signifier is clarified.

5. Conclusion

Saussure’s language theory originated from Western linguistic and philosophical traditions. Exploring its ideological roots will undoubtedly help grasp Saussure’s theoretical and ideological system. In his paper *The German Roots of Saussure’s Linguistic Theory* [Yao, 1993, p. 27] expressed a belief that Saussure’s social psychology view, system view, language symbol view, the distinction between synchronicity and diachrony, the distinction between segmental and associative relationships had been considered, foreseen and elaborated by German linguists such as Humboldt and Paul. A year earlier, [Yang & Zhang, 1992] deeply

elucidated the linear characteristics of Saussure's linguistic symbols displaying a unique understanding of the philosophical connotation of this theoretical issue.

Saussure was not only an expert but also a true thinker. Although Saussure himself did not have any philosophical works in the general sense, his linguistic insights not only contributed to this science but also had a profound impact on modern thought. Saussure's linguistics is called structural linguistics. Structuralism was not only became the main linguistic trend in the following decades but also extended to many social and humanities research fields. Structural linguistics advocates the analytical method decomposing the system into its constituent elements and then discussing the relationship between them. This is also the main meaning of "analysis" in analytical philosophy. To a certain extent, society can be regarded as an overall structure, and individuals are units in this structure. Individuals do not become units naturally but are defined by their functions at a higher level.

As a philosophical thought, the main argument of structuralism is that meaning occurs in a structure; this structure, whether it is a linguistic system, a system of social norms, or a psychological structure, is not the normal content of the actor's consciousness; it is omnipresent, and it is what any consciousness depends on. Zhang San said a sentence, and the meaning of this sentence is not equal to Zhang San here and now how to say this. We think about what we are saying, but we don't think about why we are saying what we are saying. This is a structural question and a theoretical question to be explored by a philosopher and a scientist. Science seeks not the cause of an event but the principle or meaning of an event. This meaning is not made up of antecedents, but it is produced by a system of meanings. This main line of structuralism is anti-historicism: history is only an illustration of synchronic analysis. As a linguist, Saussure did not elaborate on the relationship between language and reality, but his theory is perfectly compatible with the idea of a holistic connection between language and reality. After all, we do not need language to access reality. Language only makes reality understood at the linguistic level.

Saussure's philosophy of language not only directly promoted the establishment and development of modern linguistics but also had an important influence on other fields of humanities. After Saussure, modern linguistics developed vigorously, and the Geneva School of Linguistics led by Saussure's disciples directly carried Saussure's linguistic theory forward. At the same time, several linguistic schools emerged successively in the West, such as the Prague School, the Copenhagen School (as analyzed in [Ding, 2006, pp. 22–28]), the American Descriptive Language School and the Transformational Generative Grammar School, all of them claiming Saussure as their predecessor. It can be said that linguistics in the 20th century was the era of Saussure's structural linguistics. Up to now, few people have gone beyond Saussure's linguistic model to establish a new linguistic approach.

References

- Ding, X. (2006). About semiotics and its research. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 4, 22–28. (In Chinese).
- Feng, Zh. (1999). *Schools of Modern Linguistics*. Shaanxi People's Publishing House. (In Chinese).
- Saussure, F. de. (1916). *Course in General Linguistics*. Translated by W. Baskin in 1959. London : Peter Owen Ltd.
- Saussure, F. de. (1959). *Course in General Linguistics*. New York : Philosophical Library Press.
- Saussure, F. de. (1999). *Course in General Linguistics*. Chinese translation. The Commercial Press.
- Xing, F., Wu, Zh. (2002). *Introduction to Linguistics*. Wuhan : Central China Normal University Press. (In Chinese).
- Xu, Y. (2001). "Language Turn" in British and American Analytical Philosophy in the 20th Century. In Chen Bo (Ed.), *Analytical Philosophy – Review and Reflection* (pp. 323–334). Chengdu : Sichuan Education Press. (In Chinese).

- Jacobson, R. (2001). *Collected Works of Jacobson*. Hunan Education Press.
- Yao, X. (1993). The German Roots of Saussure's Linguistic Theory. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 3, 27–32. (In Chinese).
- Yang, Zh., Zhang, Sh. (1992). Problems with linear characteristics of language symbols. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 1, 46–50. (In Chinese).
- Lecerle, J. J. (2006). *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*. Translated by G. Elliott. Leiden : Brill.
- Volosinov, V. N. (1930). *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by L. Matejka & I. R. Titunik in 1973. New York : Seminar Press.

Статья поступила в редакцию 03.07.2024; одобрена после рецензирования 07.05.2025; принята к публикации 02.06.2025.
The article was submitted 03.07.2024; approved after reviewing 07.05.2025; accepted for publication 02.06.2025.