

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)



Saussure whom we know as 'Ferdinand de Saussure' is actually Ferdinand Mongin de Saussure, and was born in Geneva in 1857.

Saussure's grandfather, Nicolas-Theodore was a physicist, chemist, naturalist, and professor of geology and mineralogy at the University of Geneva, and had discovered a mineral which he named as SAUSSURITE!

His father, Henri Louis Frédéric de Saussure, was a multi-talented person. He was a mineralogist, entomologist, and taxonomist.

Saussure showed this legacy of intellect and talent as early as the age of fourteen.

After a year of studying Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and taking a variety of courses at the University of Geneva, he started his graduate work at the University of Leipzig in 1876.

Saussure published a book entitled 'Dissertation on the Primitive Vowel System in Indo-European Languages' at the age of 21.

After this he studied for a year at Berlin, where he wrote a doctoral thesis on the locative absolute in Sanskrit. He returned to Leipzig and was awarded his doctorate in 1880.

After this, he came back to Paris, where he lectured on Sanskrit, Gothic and Old High German, and occasionally other subjects. He taught at the Practical School of Higher Studies for eleven years and he was given a title i.e. **'Knight of the Legion of Honor'**. Later he was offered a professorship in Geneva in 1891. Saussure taught Sanskrit and Indo-European at the University of Geneva for the rest of his life.

It was only in 1907 that Saussure accepted to teach the Course of General Linguistics, which he would offer three times, ending in the summer of 1911.

According to some sources, Saussure attempted at various times in the 1880s and 1890s to write a book on general linguistics, but could never be satisfied enough to do so.

So, he systematically burn all his manuscripts and class-handouts that he prepared for teaching the course of general linguistics. Later he died in 1913 in Switzerland.

Saussure did not publish anything despite he was born genius and almost anyone who was worth mentioning acknowledged his talent.

Yet, Saussure kept saying and very honestly believed that he had nothing worth to say about general linguistics.

There could have been two reasons for it. One, whatever he was saying had already been said in the traditions that he had been trained in such as Sanskrit, Greek and Latin etc.

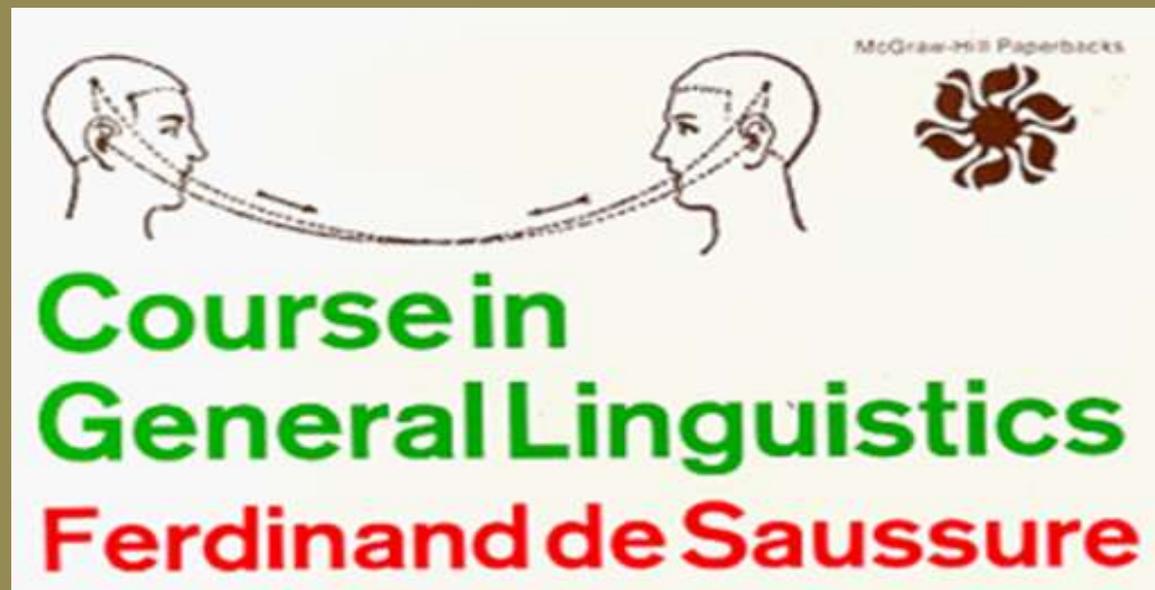
Two, he might be reluctant to take a position which was very different from the one that prevailed in his time.

What was inevitable though, was the effect that he had already produced,

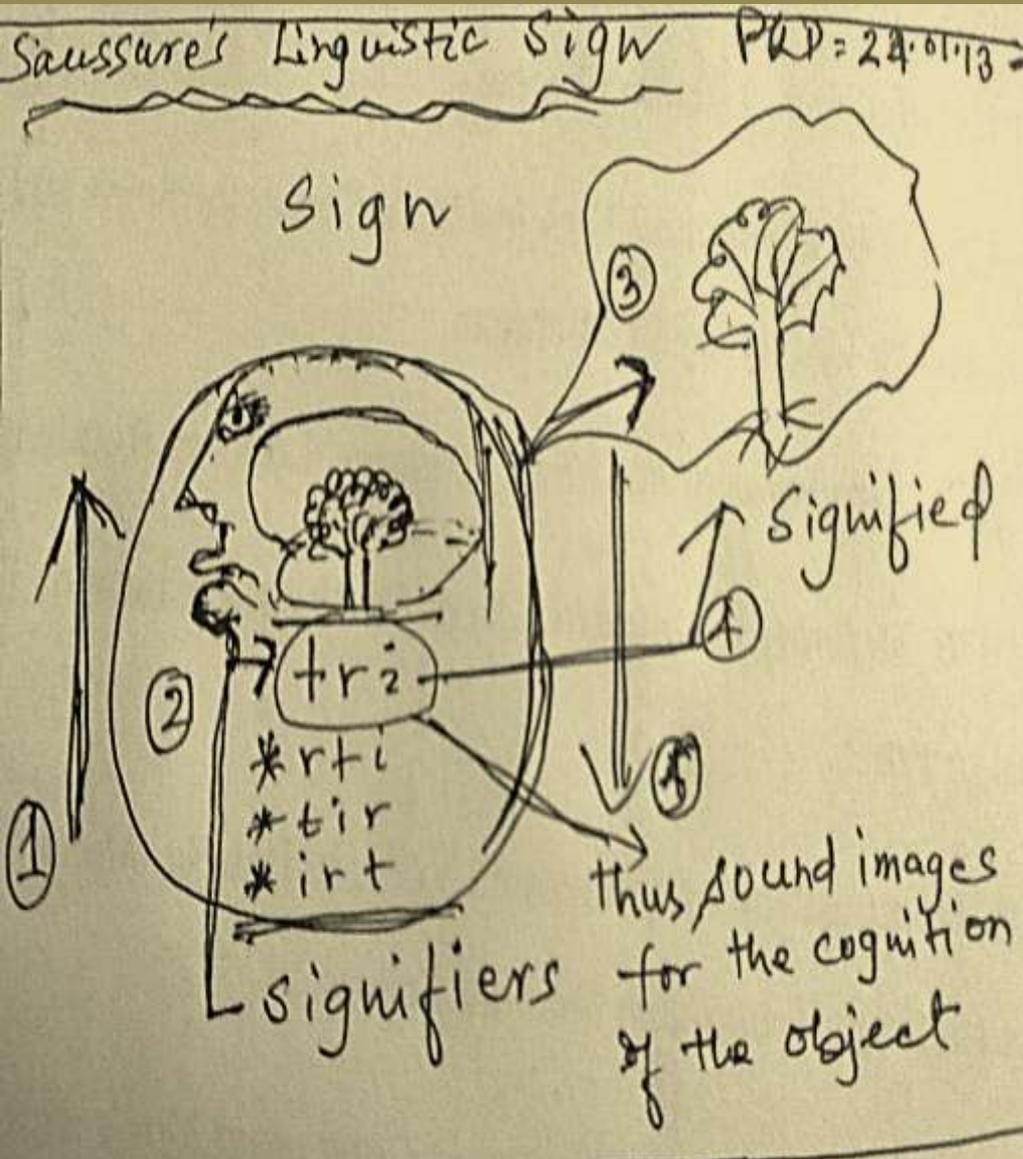
and the demand of the change in the approaches to the knowledge was all around due to his teaching and lecturing in almost all prestigious places in Europe.

As a result, his students got together and collected and collated their class-notes that they had written down in Saussure's class and decided to publish them in the form of a book.

Emile Constantin's lecture notes and incorporating from other students class-notes, the book titled 'Course in General Linguistics' was published in 1916, three years after Saussure's death.



The core idea



The most important thing to notice in the picture is the arrows:

Arrow 1: it links the signifiers to evoke the mental image.

Arrow 2: justifies that only one sequence is qualified as a signifiers

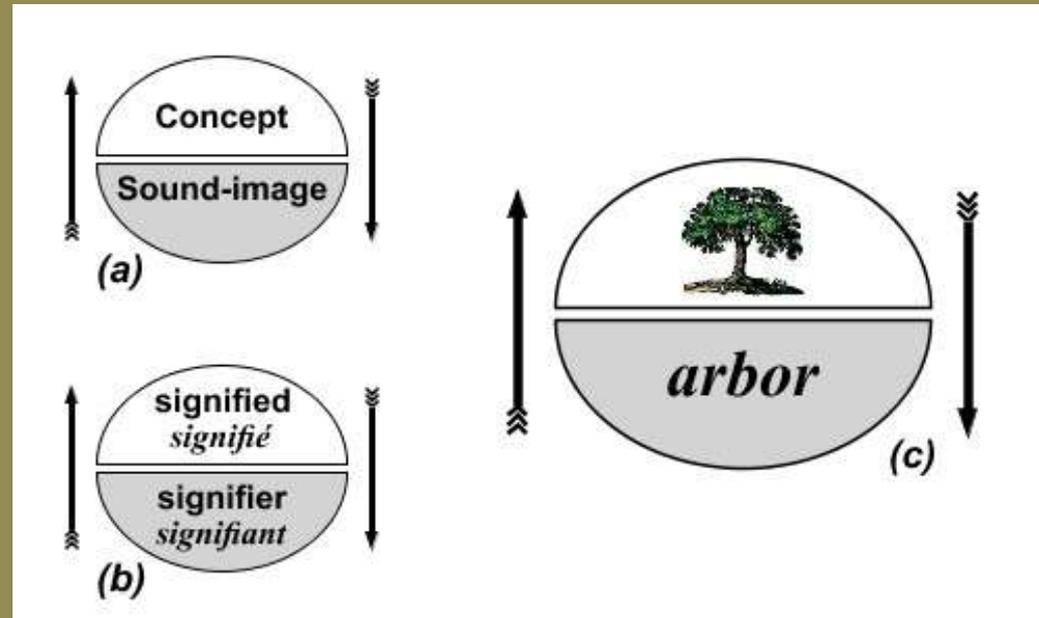
Arrow 3: the human mind confirms the match of the object as the part of competence

Arrow 4: once the object in the mind is evoked (3), the cognition takes place and the signifiers are signified

Arrow 5: the signifiers function as the SOUND-IMAGES

Saussure - key points

- interested specifically with the spoken word
 - written languages are included since they directly relate to spoken ones
- his model consists of two components;
 - the patterns decoded by the perceptual system (signifier)
 - the concept they represent (signified)



Saussure's model of a Sign

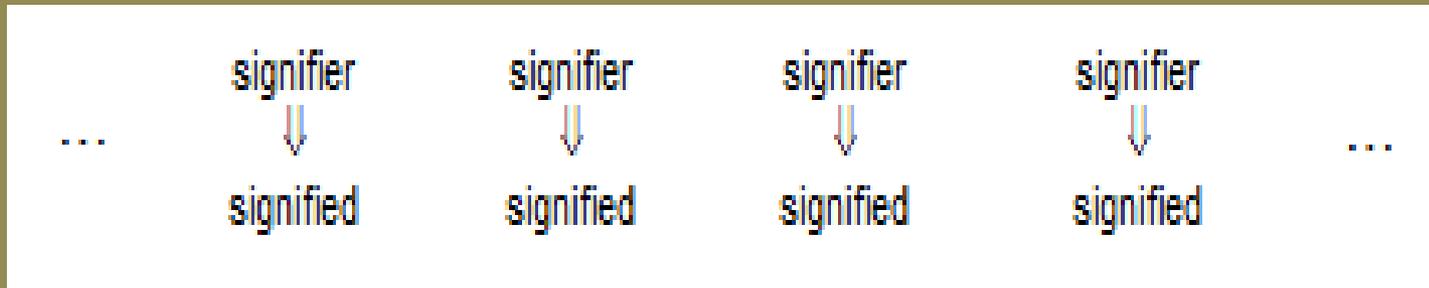
(Chandler, 1994)

Saussure - key points

- the sign results from the association between the signifier and signified
 - ie the process of signification, represented by the arrows in the diagram
- a sign must have both signifier and signified
 - like the two sides of a piece of paper; cannot be cut to separate the two
- for Saussure, the two were entirely ‘psychological’;
 - modern approaches usually hold that the signified is the part of the sign that is physical; capable of being sensed
- signs only make sense as part of a system of signs
 - no sign makes sense on its own; signs refer to each other

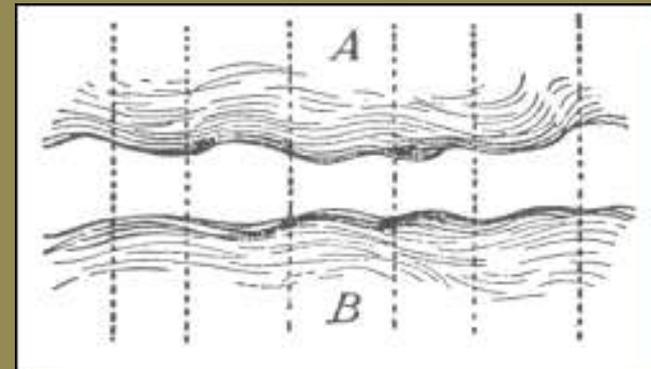
Saussure - key points

- relationships between signs;



e. g. planes of sound(phonic material) and thought;

- correlated - dotted lines
- arbitrary - wavy lines
- a mental distinction - varying gap between planes;
- Yet perception and thought would match with the phonic value of the sound wave
- Credit goes to the sign and its signifiers



Saussure - key points

- value: gives rise to the meaning of a sign;
- According to Saussure every sign is meaningful, which means
 - one sign also means ‘not the other signs’
 - the relationship between one sign and the others in the system
- ‘signification’ - the transfer of meaning
 - the mental concepts that allow us to internally categorise reality in order to understand it
 - the value **does not** come from the relationship between signifier and reality (we have already seen that this is arbitrary and culture-dependant; different languages have different vocabulary)
 - the value **does** come from the relationship between the sign and *the other signs around it...*
- Saussure emphasises differences
 - a single sign means nothing, since it could stand for anything - its value comes from its difference to other signs in the sign system

Saussure - key points

- **value is composed of two things;**
 - something that is different and can be substituted
 - something that is the same and can be compared
- **where there is choice, there is meaning;**
 - when you choose one sign over another, then you mean something by it



Saussure - key points

- syntagmatic - a collection of signs which are organised into a linear sequence;
 - ‘the cat sat on the mat’ - the words are the signs that are arranged into a syntagmatic sequence
 - each word is a syntagm formed by the signs which are letters
 - the sentence is a sign which is part of the syntagmic sequence of this slide
 - the value of the sentence is affected by the other signs on the slide
- rules and conventions are features of syntagms
 - You can't air it vs. You can tear it.
 - in a language these rules are called a 'grammar'
 - other syntagms have their own rules; the syntagm i.e. the way you dress has rules called 'taste', 'fashion', 'practicality', 'personality statement'

two more useful terms;

- convention and motivation;
 - the way in which meaning is apprehended from a sign
- convention - the extent to which we agree on meaning
 - this is the cultural dependency of a sign; a skirt worn by an individual signifies that the wearer is female, a glass of champagne signifies a celebration, a white lower case 'i' on blue signifies 'information point'
- motivation - the level of involvement required by the observer in order to recognise meaning
 - a highly motivated sign is iconic - the observer can discover the meaning without recourse to cultural reference; trip hazard sign, a photograph, the Olympic Games pictogram for cycling
 - signs that lack motivation must rely on convention to relate to their meaning; the biohazard sign, many of the Olympic Games pictograms for the pentathlon

