

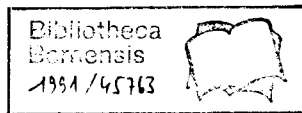
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Saussure on Etymology

Etymology has hitherto been seldom mentioned in connection with Saussurean linguistics, perhaps because the few remarks referring explicitly to it in the *Cours de linguistique générale* suggest that Saussure depreciated it¹. Another reason for the neglect of etymology on the part of Saussure scholars is undoubtedly the fact that etymology is connected with diachrony, and it is a common belief that he also depreciated diachrony. This is not the place to discuss how much importance Saussure in fact attached to diachronic research², but there is no doubt whatever that he conducted etymological research³. Furthermore, there is evidence, as I shall show in this paper, that he tended to regard etymology as related to his own system of synchronic linguistics.

While most linguists today no longer practise etymology, it was regarded as an indispensable element in linguistic study as recently as a hundred years ago. William Dwight Whitney, writing in the middle of the last century, called etymology "the foundation and substructure of all investigation of language" (Whitney 1884:55). Comparative linguistics, of the kind practised in the nineteenth century rested on an elaborate network of word-genealogies. Moreover, it is still true today that without sets of cognates in a series of related languages a linguist working on a set of related languages cannot undertake phonological reconstruction and hence cannot begin to reconstruct the proto-language.

Traditional etymology, on the other hand, not only antedates linguistics of the nineteenth-century variety but is also considerably older than the Western grammatical tradition. The urge to explain the obvious fact that many proper names can be broken down into meaningful parts has existed in most if not all cultures and can be documented in all the ancient literatures which have come down to us. Thus, there are examples in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the Homeric poems, in Hesiod, and many other Greek and Roman authors⁴. The etymological procedure of breaking analysable names into components gives rise to the notion that all words, especially all nouns, are similarly analysable. This in turn prompts the idea that human language originally contained all the ingredients from which analysable words were formed in later times by compounding and phonetic deformation. If we add the attractive notion that the primordial root-words were echoic, we have a fully-fledged etymological theory. Variants of this theory were widely discussed in

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- 1 See Saussure 1972:259-60, i.e., the appendix entitled *L'Étymologie* which the editors added to part III. It is in fact the last of three appendices, which may indicate the importance that the editors attached to the topic. Further remarks relevant to etymology may be found in chapter III of part V. Moreover, chapter I of part V develops the important distinction between the retrospective and prospective perspectives in diachronic linguistics. There is no mention of etymology in Amacker's survey of Saussurean linguistics (see Amacker 1975). Scheerer, on the other hand, alludes to Saussure's publications on etymological topics (see Scheerer 1980:24). The most careful discussions of Saussure's notions regarding etymology I am aware of are Engler 1982 and Vallini 1978.
 - 2 On this important question, see Engler 1975:866-68 and De Mauro's valuable comments in Saussure 1972:448 (N 146), 451 (N 167), 474 (N 291).
 - 3 Saussure's published papers on etymological topics may be found in Bally/Gautier 1922. For a discussion of Saussure's etymological practice, see Vallini 1978.
 - 4 For a survey of such views with bibliography, see Borst 1957.

fifth-century Athens, and we find them reflected in Plato's *Cratylus*. Among the post-Aristotelian philosophical schools, the Stoics were foremost in promoting etymology. By the end of antiquity, vast etymological compilations were composed, the most influential being the *Origenes* of Isidore of Seville (died A.D. 636), a work which continued to be consulted throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.

In contrast, a grammatical tradition did not arise in the West until relatively late, namely in the first century B.C., and having been launched it existed separately from etymology. This is shown by the fact that ancient grammarians seldom criticized indefensible etymologies. Besides the well-known "*Iucus a non lucendo*", we are dealing with such macaronic monstrosities as "*apis, quia sine pedibus nascitur*"⁵. An interesting example of a grammarian joining issue with the etymologists, is Aulus Gellius, who questioned the derivation of *testamentum* from *mentis contestatio* (*Attic Nights*, VII. 12). In the main, however, etymology and grammatical analysis were kept apart in antiquity, and this situation persisted virtually unchanged throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

In the thirteenth century, an important extension in the meaning of "etymology" took place. Grammarians began using the term to refer to the part of grammar dealing with declensions, conjugations, and word-formation⁶. Thus defined, etymology took its place alongside the other three divisions of grammar, namely orthography, prosody, and syntax. This use of the term continued until well into the nineteenth century⁷. The double meaning of etymology, namely word-origins and morphology, was made possible by the fact that up to the nineteenth century no distinction was drawn between synchrony and diachrony. It was assumed without question that the principles which account for the structure of analysable words are the same as those which yield a historical account of the manner in which words originate and change through time.

A new perspective on etymology gained acceptance in the nineteenth century with the advent of comparative linguistics. The novelty lay in the fact that attention was focused away from the problem of the origin of the lexicon to the problem of the original meanings of inflectional affixes. As Bopp expressed it, "we leave untouched the mystery of roots or the question of how the primordial concepts came to be named"⁸. However, scholars could still assume, if they so wished, that roots were the same thing as Plato's primordial words (*protá onomata*). At some distant period in the past, they could picture to themselves, human beings conversed exclusively in root-words. Viewed from this perspective, inflectional and derivational affixes were degenerate roots, i.e., elements which had at some earlier period been roots.

At the same time, the atmosphere of mystery surrounding etymology began to dissipate. This was in large part due to the fact that so much more was now known about the history of languages. Fanciful explanations lost their appeal in an age of increasingly precise historical knowledge, and linguists abandoned the notion that etymology provides us

5 "*Apes dictae, vel quod se pedibus invicem alligent, vel pro eo quod sine pedibus nascuntur*" (Isidore, *Etymologiae sive origenes*, XII, 8).

6 See Thurot 1869:147 for a discussion of this development.

7 For confirmation of this fact, see the article "Etymology" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (meanings 2 and 3). In the course of the nineteenth century, the term "Morphology", borrowed from biology, replaced "Etymology".

8 "Nur das Geheimnis der Wurzeln oder des Benennungsgrundes der Urbegriffe lassen wir unange-tastet" (Bopp 1868:III).

with insights into the "true" meanings of words. Thus, in a paper from 1871, Madvig argued in favour of restricting the field of etymology to the study of contingent historical facts and denied etymology any ultimate explanatory value (see Madvig 1875:319-55). The question of the origin of language, which underlay much of the traditional obsession with etymology, lost its attractiveness as the greatly extended chronological perspective inspired by discoveries in geology and archaeology gained general acceptance.

Meanwhile, linguists tried to separate different chronological layers in the development of the languages they studied, whether ancient or modern, and began to distinguish more and more carefully between historical change and synchronic states. Thus, phonetic changes, it was increasingly realized, must be kept separate from the subsequent morphological alternations which they are liable to give rise to. This viewpoint became especially widespread among linguists who worked on recent periods of linguistic history, i.e., the students of Romance, Slavic, and Germanic languages. Significantly, neither etymology nor the reconstruction of proto-languages is covered in the influential *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte* (1880) by Hermann Paul, who it may be recalled specialized in the history of German.

It is in this general context that we must approach the passage in the *Cours de linguistique générale* which deals with etymology. The editors based the opening paragraphs on Saussure's first Geneva course, which was given in the academic year 1906-1907⁹. In Albert Riedlinger's notes, we read that etymology is neither a separate discipline in its own right nor part of a discipline, but merely the application of the two domains (*des deux ordres de faits*), namely the diachronic and the synchronic domains, and within diachrony the prospective and the retrospective perspectives¹⁰. An etymologist pursues the past history of a single word until he finds something which explains it. In essence, explaining a word means discovering some idea or meaning which differs from but is not necessarily simpler than what is associated with the word at the present time. Thus, to derive French *tendre* from Latin *tendere* is, according to Saussure, hardly worthy of the name of etymology because the two words mean the same thing. In contrast, if we are told that French *pondre* comes from Latin *ponere*, we feel satisfied, because the meaning of the latter is more general than the meaning of the former. Similarly, deriving German *morgen* 'tomorrow' from *Morgen* 'morning' is a satisfactory etymological explanation because a semantic connection has to be established between the two words. To discover the key word which provides an etymological explanation, the etymologist sometimes invokes phonetic change (e.g., French *sevrer* from Latin *separare*), sometimes synchronic analogy (as when Latin *pugnare* 'to fight' is derived from *pugnis* 'fist'), and in other cases a complicated blend of the two.

This flexible approach seems to have struck Saussure as fraught with methodological danger. Riedlinger writes (Engler 1968:434):

Pour arriver à cette autre idée <qui explique>, je me sers de tous les moyens et je ne fais aucune attention aux opérations que — toujours rétrospectivement — je sois obligée de faire: tantôt je <suis dans> la phonétique pure: *sevrer* de *separare* (j'arrive

9 See Godel 1957:63. The passage in question may be found in Engler 1968:431.

10 Much the same attitude to etymology is found in Saussure's early lecture on morphology, which may date from 1894-1895: "L'Étymologie qu'on donne parfois comme une branche de la science du langage, ne représente pas un ordre déterminé de recherches et encore moins un ordre déterminé de faits. Faire de l'étymologie, c'est faire une certaine application de nos connaissances phonétiques et morphologiques" (Engler 1974:17).

à une autre idée qui se divise en deux idées: <*se-parare*>), tantôt j'emprunte tout à l'analogie: *pugnare* de *pugnus*. Dans un troisième exemple, on sera obligé de suivre une filière qui fera passer tantôt par la phonétique tantôt par l'analogie, ce sera très compliqué.

For this reason, Saussure feels justified in excluding the subject of etymology from the topic of diachronic linguistics:

Nous avons donc le droit d'exclure l'étymologie des chapitres que l'on pourrait concevoir comme faisant partie de la linguistique évolutive.

In other words, because of its methodological complexity Saussure did not consider etymology a suitable topic to deal with in the book on general linguistics for which he projected his lectures as a preparation.

The editors of the *Cours* also utilized a second documentary source in composing the chapter on etymology, namely the notes taken down by Louis Brüttsch in the course "Étymologie grecque et latine", which Saussure offered in the winter semester of the academic year 1911-12, five years after he gave the first course on general linguistics. In the first lecture, according to Brüttsch's notes (Engler 1968:431), Saussure begins by discussing the term etymology in its traditional sense. Plato used the word to denote the authentic value of a word, i.e., its unadulterated form free from subsequent deformations. But, cautions Saussure, determining the semantic extension of a word on the basis of its fortuitous content is a bad procedure, since usage alone determines what a word means. As normally used, "etymology" suggests the idea of provenance. But provenance is an ambiguous term since it can either mean the historical provenance of words, as when one says that French *chair* comes from Latin *caro* by phonetic change and that French *labourer* 'to plough' comes from Latin *laborare* 'to work' by semantic change, or it can refer to relations of grammatical derivation, as when one says that French *pommier* 'apple-tree' "comes from" *pomme* 'apple'. Historical provenance is a relation of identity between the French term and its Latin counterpart. The other kind of provenance is a relation of grammatical derivation, where the relation of identity plays no role since what we have from the beginning is two coexisting terms A and B.

In all etymology, according to Saussure, appeal is made to both relations, sometimes to one or the other, and sometimes to both at once, but what is quintessentially etymological is the second relation, e.g., the relation between *pommier* and *pomme* (Engler 1968:432):

Dans toute étymologie, on fera appel tantôt à un de ces rapports, tantôt — et très souvent — à tous les deux à la fois. Le plus proprement étymologique est le second, celui qui rattache un mot à un autre.

If we restrict etymology to the first kind of provenance, says Saussure, it is incomplete. For example, if we simply say that French *oiseau* comes from Latin *avicellus* or that modern French *labourer* 'to plough' comes from earlier *labourer* 'to work', all that we have done is to discover a relation of identity between two forms, but if we relate *avicellus* to *avis*, we have suggested a relation of grammatical provenance from the word *avis*. We can extend the meaning of etymology, according to Saussure, by saying that it is not simply the investigation of the origins of words but the investigation of the relations between words. Viewed in this way, etymology is nothing but word-explanation since there is, after all, no natural relation between sound and meaning. All words are arbitrary, and no internal explanation of words can be given. Words, therefore, can be explained only by connecting them with other words, which are themselves arbitrary (Engler 1968:433):

Tout mot étant arbitraire, il s'ensuit qu'aucune explication intérieure ne peut être donnée; il ne reste donc qu'à ramener le mot à d'autres, qui sont eux-mêmes arbitraires.

Saussure recommends deepening the meaning of the word "etymology" by re-defining it to mean the study of the relations between words:

Ces observations nous permettent d'approfondir le sens que renferme le mot *étymologie*. Au lieu de dire que c'est "la recherche de l'origine d'un mot", nous pouvons dire avec plus de vérité que c'est la recherche des rapports d'un mot avec d'autres. Ce qui revient exactement à dire que c'est "l'explication d'un mot".

For example, if *avicellus* were an isolated form, no explanation would result when we say that it gave rise to French *oiseau* since no relations with other words would exist. Using a similar reasoning, we can say that *ennemi* is explainable since it is related to other words which are already known, namely Latin *inimicus*, which is connected with *amicus*. Sometimes, the word being analysed is directly derivable from some other word, as in the cases of *avicellus* ← *avis* and *pommier* ← *pomme*, but sometimes it is related to a whole family of words, and in those instances it may not be possible to say which of them it is related to. Thus, *fragilis*, the source of French *frêle*, is related to *frango*, *fractus*, and other words. Therefore, it cannot be determined whether *fragilis* is derived from *frango* or from *fractus*. Thus, one of the functions of etymology is to investigate word-families, an operation in which it engages at the same time as it investigates individual words. The meanings of suffixes must also be ascertained since they enable the analyst to account for the meanings of derivatives.

Moreover, etymology is basically analytical: it takes isolated words and follows them back in time or follows out the affiliations among the individual words belonging to a family of words. Hence, it is not a synthesizable body of knowledge and for that reason is not part of linguistics. For in its ideal state, linguistics would be concerned exclusively with describing facts, and there would be no room for etymology, which is nothing but a linguist's perspective having no counterpart in linguistic reality itself. Etymological research is not directed at a single determinate goal (Engler 1968:434):

L'étymologie ne présente pas un ensemble synthétique, et il résulte de là qu'on ne peut pas dire qu'elle soit une partie de la linguistique. Dans la linguistique idéale qui n'aurait pas de place pour l'étymologie, car elle n'est qu'un point de vue du linguiste qui ne correspond pas à un chapitre des faits eux-mêmes. ... Le travail étymologique ne se fait par conséquent dans aucune direction déterminée et régulière¹¹.

Here, Saussure shifts his ground slightly. His previous remarks, he says, were concerned with etymology in the common acceptance of the term. Linguists, however, use the term in a technical sense to refer to lexicology, i.e., everything in language which has no connection with grammatical, or more specifically syntactic, relations. Thus, in the words *marchons*, *marchez*, etc., the inflectional endings, *-ons* and *-ez*, are of no interest to the etymologist, but everything else is. Etymology in this technical sense is less analytical than traditional etymology (Engler 1968:434): "... dans cette nouvelle acception, il ne s'agira plus, jusqu'à un certain point, d'analyse."

11 At this point in his notes Brüttsch writes in the margin: "Voir à ce sujet: R. Thurneysen: "Die Etymologie" (ouvrage où le caractère analytique n'est toutefois pas suffisamment marqué)." This is a reference to Thurneysen 1905, reprinted in Schmitt 1977:50-73. The reference was clearly provided by Saussure himself.

Thus, etymology, in the special linguistic sense of the term, is virtually synonymous with word-formation. It comprises the study of word-families, i.e., word-roots and the study of derivational suffixes, in other words, everything except inflectional suffixes. However, even in this new sense, the previous remarks about etymology apply, according to Saussure. That is to say, the aim in etymology is still to relate words to each other, not merely to trace them back in time. When the comparative method is applied to etymology, evidence provided by related languages throws light on word-origins. But even then, entirely satisfactory etymological explanations cannot always be arrived at. For instance, says Saussure, we observe a number of Indo-European cognates with the meaning 'left': Latin *laevus*, Greek *lai(v)os*, Old Church Slav *levu*. On the basis of these forms we can reconstruct a proto-form **laiwos*, but this form cannot be related to any known word, and this is therefore an imperfect etymology: "**laiwos* ne pouvant être rattaché à aucun mot connu, l'étymologie est imparfaite" (Brütsch 1911/12:5).

Thus, in his course on Greek and Latin etymology, no less than in the first course on general linguistics, Saussure maintains a sceptical attitude to etymology, while conceding explanatory power to it when and only when it throws light on the relations between words. Regardless of the validity of this approach, it undeniably represents the essence of Saussure's contribution to the problem of etymology and its relation to linguistics as a whole. Specifically, the notion that explanation is not achieved until *intra*-linguistic relations are illuminated is quintessentially Saussurean.

We must remind ourselves that Saussure lived at a time when the focus of linguistics had shifted away from the reconstruction of proto-languages to the study of more recent periods of the history of languages. Reconstruction was no longer the principal aim of linguistic research, and the increasing knowledge of the history of languages had led to a realization that mechanical rules of analytical procedure do not necessarily yield valid results¹². Saussure had been trained as a practitioner of the older variety of linguistics — he practised reconstruction (most notably in the *Mémoire*), and he also wrote a number of articles on etymological topics. It is significant that as he grew older he abandoned the kind of research that had made him famous as a young man: the *Mémoire* had no sequel. His remarks on etymology, beginning with his lecture on morphology from the mid-1890s, and ending with his lectures from the final years of his life, afford us interesting glimpses of the reasons behind his disillusionment with reconstruction and etymology.

In this context, the distinction between the prospective and retrospective perspectives in diachronic study offers us the basic clue. Although these two perspectives are nothing more than perspectives, i.e., not realities, Saussure treated them like the diachrony-synchrony antinomy. They were to be kept separate at all costs, even in pedagogical presentations. Moreover, Saussure clearly preferred the prospective perspective because it follows the march of events and is, as he put it, like a simple narration. If the prospective method were feasible everywhere, linguists would not need to use any inferential methodology whatever (Engler 1968:481):

Pour la diachronie *prospective*, c'est tout simple: <si ce point de vue était toujours possible, il n'y aurait besoin d'aucune méthode; le point de vue prospectif> n'est qu'une simple narration.

12 See, for instance, Thurneysen's comments on the reliability of etymology (Schmitt 1977:67), with which Saussure was almost certainly familiar (see N 10 above). Schuchardt, another author whom Saussure read and appreciated, should also be mentioned in this connection, see Spitzer 1928: 108-17.

Etymology, on the other hand, is basically retrospective, and is practised on the basis of comparison. Moreover, it is for the most part analytical in that it focuses on individual words. Saussure's system of synchronic linguistics, on the other hand, was projected to be synthetic, i.e., to offer an overall system in which each individual fact has its natural place. Etymology can also be synthetic, but only in so far as it is able to shed light on the mutual relation among words. Hence, whenever a word-origin proposed by an etymologist fails to establish links between that word and others, it is unsatisfactory. Linguistics is ideally descriptive, but it is explanatory to the extent that it establishes connections of this kind.

The principle of arbitrariness, it may be recalled, also reinforces the injunction to concentrate on interrelation, for since there is no natural connection between the individual word and its referent in the real world, word-interrelations are all there is in language. Indeed, arbitrariness has implications for the study of diachrony in general: it is precisely because there is no external tangible basis for the individual linguistic sign that the methodological separation of synchrony and diachrony is mandatory for the practising linguist. Diachronic facts, not the mystical links between words and referents pursued illusorily by the etymologists of antiquity, provide the only explanation for the particular phonological and semantic configuration of individual linguistic signs. As one of Saussure's students wrote in his notes: "Pourquoi disons-nous: *homme, chien*? Parce qu'on a dit avant *homme, chien*. La justification est dans le temps"¹³.

In this way, diachronic facts furnish the only guidelines to be followed by etymologists. Moreover, in the Saussurean perspective, the discovery of synchronic interrelations is the goal towards which they proceed, and only when they reach that goal are they in a position to provide truly satisfying explanations. The study of word-origins, which in antiquity had been pursued in virtual isolation from grammar and in more recent times had been the mainstay of comparative linguistics, now becomes an incidental, albeit inevitable, product of both diachronic and synchronic linguistics. One can conclude that by insisting on the complete integration of etymology into linguistics, both diachronic and synchronic, Saussure made an important contribution to the debate on the nature and significance of etymology.

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13 Engler 1968:165, fifth column.

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