



**Between the Sureness
of Theory and the Folly
of Literature. A commentary
to the reception of Saussure's
theory of language
(from Jakobson to Bagić)**

Между уверенностью теории
и безумием литературы.
Комментарий к восприятию
теории языка де Соссюра
(от Якобсона до Багича)

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Rather small in number but highly influential works of the Swiss linguist still trigger fierce controversies and heated interpretation disputes. According to some researchers, de Saussure embodies a scientific paradigm and represents what in the humanities is most systematized and scientific while to others, he is an insane scientist secretly studying old poetry in order to discover meanings encoded in poems. The article sums up a hundred-year-old reception of the Genevan's thought in the literary studies and it explains anagrammatic poems dedicated to Saussure's theory.

STRUCTURALISM, ANAGRAMS,
POSTSTRUCTURALISM,
DECONSTRUCTION, GRAMMATOLOGY,
SEMIOLOGY, RECEPTION

Скромные по объему, но очень влиятельные достижения швейцарского лингвиста по-прежнему вызывают разногласия и страстные интерпретационные споры. Согласно одним исследователям де Соссюр воплощает научную парадигму и является представителем того, что в гуманитарных науках наиболее систематизировано и точно, для других – это скорее всего сумасшедший ученый, тайно изучающий древнюю поэзию для того, чтобы раскрыть секретное содержание, зашифрованное в стихотворениях. В статье подводятся итоги столетней рецепции мысли женева в литературоведении и обсуждаются анаграмматические стихи, посвященные теории де Соссюра.

СТРУКТУРАЛИЗМ, АНАГРАММЫ,
ПОСТСТРУКТУРАЛИЗМ,
ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ, ГРАММАТОЛОГИЯ,
СЕМИОЛОГИЯ, РЕЦЕПЦИЯ

For several years we have been witnessing an increased interest in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and in himself, which is not without a relation to two round anniversaries celebrated in 2013 and 2016. Both the 100th anniversary of the scholar's death and the 100th anniversary of the publication of the history's most famous linguistic compendium, which his *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique générale*) undoubtedly is, were commemorated in conferences and scientific sessions which took place almost all over the world as well as in numerous publications re-interpreting the works of the linguist from Geneva and outlining the up-to-now reception of his ideas. To be more specific, the reception which has been very stormy, "even adventurous and romantic" (Grzegorzcyk 2017: 77).

Rather small in number, especially taking into consideration papers which the author prepared to publish, but highly influential works of the Swiss linguist triggered and – as the latest publications show – still trigger such fierce controversies and such heated interpretation disputes that one cannot but have an impression as if the participants were not discussing the same scientist. According to some, he embodies a scientific paradigm and represents what in the humanities is most systematized and scientific while to others, he is an insane scientist secretly studying old poetry in order to discover meanings encoded in poems. Suffice to say, the "duality" or the "dualism" of Saussure ("Les deux Saussure", "la dualité saussurienne" [Calvet 1975: 46]) became a scientific problem which was discussed in separate papers, even at scientific conferences (Lotringer 1974). Following such rhetoric, one should add that from the perspective of over a hundred years' presence of the Genevan scholar's thought in the world science, it would be legitimate to hold a conference entitled "Four Saussures". The term "Saussure's theory of language" was defined in different ways by various

researchers at various stages and referred to four different text corpora which were presented to the world at long intervals.¹

The first and the most well-known Saussure would be the nominal author of the *Course in General Linguistics*, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Until 1957, when *The manuscript sources of the Course in General Linguistics by F. de Saussure (Les sources manuscrites du „Cours de linguistique générale” de F. de Saussure)* by Robert Godel was published, it had been the only source of the Saussurean theory of language which by that time had already changed the face of science and made the modest linguist from Geneva a legend. The second Saussure would be the author of the Genevan lectures on general linguistics which were the basis for the *Course*, but, as it was proved, were significantly distorted and radicalised² by the editors using students' notes. One can see the extent of the distortion by reading papers by Rudolf Engler or Eisuke Komatsu. The first researcher compared the text of the *Course*, four sets of notes of students and the notes of the professor himself by printing corresponding fragments in six columns (Engler 1968–1974).³ Each of the three volumes edited by Komatsu, on the other hand, presents both in English and in French the materials from one of the three series of the famous lectures on general linguistics delivered at the University of Geneva (Komatsu 1993–1999). The fact that the last words of the *Course* indicating “the fundamental idea” (*l'idée fondamentale*) of the whole book had never been uttered by the lecturer and were added by the editors encourages one to pose a question whether it is justified to call Saussure a structuralist. Let us recall those words fraught with consequences: “The true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself” (de Saussure 1959: 232) (“La linguistique a pour unique et véritable objet de la langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même”). The continuators interpreted those words as a

1 Few Saussure's achievements, although important for the history of language, which preceded the publication of the *Course* are not discussed here since the extent of their influence has been very narrow. The main one is the book *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (1879), with which a very young author before his PhD attracted the attention of the experts.

2 The next stage of radicalization was in structuralism (Bédouret-Larraburu 2012: 28).

3 It is worth mentioning that Engler called Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye *author-editors* (Engler 2004: 46).

4
 “Dernier legs de l’héritage saussurien à nous être parvenu, avec un retard de cent ans, le manuscrit De l’essence double du langage jette aujourd’hui une lumière plus vive sur l’écart qui sépare, à cet égard, le Pseudo-Saussure du véritable Ferdinand de Saussure.”

demand for the autonomy of linguistics and took the encouragement to absolutise the systemic relations (*langue*) at the expense of their update in specific utterances (*parole*), which became the hallmark of structuralism.

The third and the fourth Saussures left the manuscripts of the linguist which were not published in his own lifetime and which showed a wide spectrum of his interests and formed two different thematic units. The analyses of old poetry revealed by Jean Starobinski (Starobinski 1964; Starobinski 1971), surrounded by an air of scandal and mystery, started to live their own life and made a spectacular career in the theory of literature. Looking for theme-words (*mot-thème*), especially names, hidden in the sound tissue of Vedic, Saturnian and New Latin poems which, as it turned out, were the other life of Saussure, who at the same time delivered lectures on general linguistics, was so inspiring that many people followed (Piekarski 2016: 219–242).

The theoretical and linguistic potential of sketches included in the *Writings in General Linguistics* (*Écrits de linguistique générale*, 2002) is being discovered today. There are opinions that in order to appreciate the substantive content of those materials, especially the work *On the Dual Essence of Language* (*De l’essence double du langage*), a real “philological revolution” should be staged (Depecker 2012). According to the co-editor of the *Writings*, Simon Bouquet, only the total re-definition of the up-to-now saussurology, especially the rejection of the hegemony of the *Course*, which created Pseudo-Saussures (Bouquet 2010b: 31–48), gives a chance that we will finally meet the real Saussure:

The last Saussurean heritage which arrived with a one hundred years’ delay, the manuscript *On the Dual Essence of Language*, sheds today a more vivid light on the difference which separates a Pseudo-Saussure from the real Ferdinand de Saussure.⁴ (Bouquet 2010a: 52)

Not all of the “four Sausures” mentioned here were equally important for the development of the literary studies. While it is impossible to imagine a modern theory of literature without the *Course* (the founding text of structuralism) and anagrams (psychoanalysis and post-structuralism), the notes from the lectures and the manuscripts, so important from the perspective of the history of linguistics as they help to discover the authentic views on language of one of the most important linguists of all time, have not been so significant for the literary research so far.⁵

It so happened that the most effective propagators of Sausurre’s ideas among literary scholars were a linguist Roman Jakobson (Jakobson 1987: 393–436; Jakobson 1971: 272–279) and a philosopher Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1967), who imposed their own conception of this theory on the scientific world (Skubaczewska-Pniewska 2013: 94–153).

Starting from the first mention in the brochure *Novejšaja russkaja poèzija* in Prague in 1921, through the famous definition of poetic function as the projection of “the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” to the statements from the early 1980s, Jakobson (1896–1982) developed Saussure’s ideas which governed each of his scientific endeavour and determined the direction of development of all structuralist schools. A set of terms of each centre was based on binary oppositions propagated in the *Course*: signifier–signified (*signifiant i signifié*), language–speaking (*langue–parole*), synchrony – diachrony (*synchronie–diachronie*), syntagmatic–associative relations (*rappports syntagmatiques–rappports associatifs*). The most universal (and “monopolistic”) from Jakobson’s proposals is the idea of two aspects of language which developed into two types of aphasia

5 On the other hand, anagrams which are so fascinating for literary scientists are rather ignored by linguists.

6 Jakobson began his scientific career in pre-revolutionary Russia, where he co-founded the Russian formal school and where he first heard (probably from Siergiej Karczewski) of the *Course*. He received a copy of the book from the editor Albert Sechehaye himself in 1920 while he was in Prague. In years 1933–1938 the structuralist was a professor at the university in Brno, then he spent two years in Scandinavia, from where he left for America in the early 1940s to deliver a series of lectures on the Saussurean theory at École Libre des Hautes Études in New York and then to take the chair in Slavic Languages at Columbia University. After that, Jakobson was a professor at Harvard and then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

and the opposition of metaphor (paradigmatic plane, i.e. the axis of selection) and metonymy (operation on the syntagmatic axis, i. e. the axis of combination), and which were grounded in the functioning of two cerebral hemispheres where one is responsible for the proper use of contiguity relations and the other for correct associations. Such dichotomies categorise all artistic phenomena and all signs of activity and human behaviour.

What is important, Jakobson was one of the first to appreciate the theoretical and literary potential of the notes on anagrams. He would publish and comment on the correspondence between Saussure and Antoine Meillet, which coincided with his own “anagrammatic” analyses of Wielimir Chlebnikow’s poetry.

Frequent changes of place of living and connections of the author of *Linguistics and Poetics* with various universities helped to disseminate Saussure’s ideas not only in the Eastern and Western Europe, but, in fact, across the whole world.⁶ Not without significance was Jakobson’s considerable standing. It was through Jakobson that Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Kristeva, Lacan and, last but not least, Derrida assimilated Saussure’s thought.

In the book suggestively entitled *What if Derrida was wrong about Saussure?* one can read that “structuralism, circa 1966, needed the radical reappraisal that Derrida’s intervention provides” (Daylight 2012: 186). The intervention came about through the deconstruction of structuralism conducted in *Of Grammatology* (*De la grammatologie*, 1967). It should, however, be borne in mind that it was a part of a large-scale philosophical project on the deconstruction of logocentrism, i.e. philosophical structure which recognises existence as presence. Opposing that tradition, Derrida put himself in the position of an initiator of a new scientific era. Structuralism with its conviction that

everything could be presented systematically and described with binary oppositions which was at that time in its heyday seemed to be a relic of the previous era. When attacking it, a deconstructionist would break the scientific paradigm and undermine the cognitive optimism of the metaphysics of presence. The selection of the *Course in General Linguistics* as the subject of the analysis and simultaneously the source of inspiration for Derrida's most important categories seems strategic. Writing a somewhat anti-*Course*, the author made *Of Grammatology* a founding text of deconstruction and at the same time anti-logocentrism and anti-phonocentrism (and, of course, post-structuralism).⁷

The influence of Jacques Derrida's philosophical programme created in confrontation with Saussure's theory on the literary research is hard to overestimate. The programme is fully accomplished in the methods of text reading used by the theoreticians of literature at Yale University, the late literary analyses of Roland Barthes as well as the works by Julia Kristeva.

Derrida infers from the *Course* both the theory of meaning as dissemination (*dissémination*) and (indirectly) interpretation as misreading, but above of all, the most important deconstruction tool, i.e. the category of *différance*. The philosopher found an ally in Saussure because of his solely "negative" understanding of language expressed in the assumption of language as the system of differences, "in language there are only differences without positive terms" (de Saussure 1959: 120). Derrida assigned significant philosophical functions to Saussure's difference that he further clarified. He wanted to see it as a condition for the existence of language and a chance to cross the metaphysics of presence. In terms of the functioning of language, a denial of identity and presence by differentiation which is both difference and deferral (according to the meaning of the French verb *différer*) means a constant

⁷ Derrida's famous paper *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (*La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines*) delivered in Baltimore in 1966, commonly thought of as the inauguration of post-structuralism, is, in fact, the announcement of paradigm change while *Of Grammatology* can be treated as a manifesto.

deferral of the balanced meaning. It is connected with the re-interpretation of the structure of linguistic sign. Derrida reduces Saussure's dyadic sign to the signifier which cannot indicate the presence of the signified, but only the presence of other signifiers which produce an undisturbed movement of traces. In other words, the signified is nothing more than a trace which is always in the position of the signifier. While *différance* (with a silent "a") is an alternative to Saussure's *différence* (with an "e"), Derrida's grammatology is a counter-proposal to Saussure's semiology, in which "sign" has been replaced with "trace".

Différance treated as the basic mechanism governing the language allowed Derrida to deny the idea of the presence of the sign, its meaning and existence itself. He says that nothing can be present in itself since there are only differences and traces of traces. Although the author of *Of Grammatology* focuses here on highlighting contradictions in the *Course*, there is no doubt that he also did his homework on anagrams (Derrida 1967: 57).

While discussing the reception of Saussure's anagrammatic analyses, it is impossible not to mention the name of Julia Kristeva. The French-Bulgarian scientist noticed that they offered an opportunity to go beyond the current linguistic and literary concepts (Kristeva 1974: 239). She took that opportunity and proposed "semanalysis" and formulated the concept of the unconscious of the text based on a non-linear transversal process of meaning. Such a perspective opens the text to unlimited context and releases it from the reign of the subject and the author. As a combination of voices and codes, the text somewhat "produces" its meaning by itself. According to Kristeva, it begins in the network of phonic differences transversely arranged and comes out as a consequence of non-linear reading, i.e. as the unconscious of the text. What is more, Kristeva also spread another Saussurean term,

namely paragrams (*paragrammes*). She made it the basis for her own “semiology of paragrams” which, in fact, was one of the versions of post-structuralist theory of intertextuality (Kristeva 1969: 113–146).

Fascination with anagrams, however fruitful, has diverted the attention of literary scholars from Saussure’s other achievements and the findings of contemporary Saussurology. Being preoccupied with the fight against “Saussurism” (Gasparov 2013: 8) and searching for the true Saussure, it has brought out innovation from the manuscripts, so far absent in the literary research. The near future will show how and to what extent also the latest findings of Saussurologists shall inspire literary researchers, but meanwhile, let us look at the one hundred-year-old reception of the theory of the Genevan scholar from the angle of literature.

Among numerous texts dedicated to Saussure and his ideas, artistic expressions seem to stand out. A starting point for further deliberations are two poetic texts: the poem *la folie de saussure* by Krešimir Bagić and the lyrics of Magnetic Fields song *The Death of Ferdinand de Saussure*, which can also be analysed as a poem. On the one hand, those works are a testimony of the highest rank which in the scientific world is assigned to the linguist; on the other hand, they are a manifestation of demythologisation of that figure.

In 1999, Merge Records released a triple-album *69 Love Songs* of the American rock (more precisely, indie rock⁸) group Magnetic Fields. As the title says, it contains sixty-nine pieces written by the group lead singer, Stephin Meritt, dealing with various aspects of love in an ironic way. What is important, all the lyrics make a somewhat poetic treatise

⁸ Indie rock, sometimes called independent rock (indie comes from independent), is considered a type of alternative music.

on how the term and subject of love function in the artistic discourse and pop culture, especially in love songs. On the third record there is a piece *The Death of Ferdinand de Saussure*, a mourning ballad in tone. Merritt sings and sometimes melorecites his own lyrics in his characteristic bass voice and already in the first part the text touches upon the theory and philosophy of language and exposes the weaknesses of structuralism, and even science in general.

*I met Ferdinand de Saussure
 On a night like this
 On love he said
 “I’m not so sure
 I even know what it is
 No understanding
 No closure
 It is a nemesis
 You can’t use a bulldozer
 To study orchids”*

Saussure, referred to in the lyrics, is an icon of linguistics, i.e. a researcher made famous by the *Course in general linguistics*. It was the book published by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye under Saussure’s name (1857–1913) in 1916 that brought the assumed author posthumous fame, who soon became one of the most influential scholars of the century. It is said that Saussure’s impact on different scientific fields equalled in strength to that of Freud and Marx, and his innovativeness to that of Galileo or Copernicus. In fact, the influence of Saussurean concept of language, and more precisely, structuralism, out of which the theory was born, spread from philosophy, through ethnology,

history and sociology, to biology while the Genevan's breakthrough in thinking of language is often compared to Copernican revolution:⁹

For just as Copernicus had claimed that the Earth rotated about the Sun, instead of the Sun rotating about the Earth, Saussure claims something analogous in the case of language. [...] Instead of seeing words as mere adjuncts to our grasp of reality, Saussure saw our understanding of reality as depending essentially upon our social use of the verbal signs which constitute the language we use. Human existence is, by definition, a linguistically articulated existence. (Harris, Taylor 1994: 177).

⁹ And it is not the only scientific revolution (as defined by Thomas Kuhn) connected with the gradual discovering of Saussure's achievements (Aron 1970; Dziadek 2001; Skubaczewska-Pniewska 2017).

What is more, it should be remembered that structuralism aspired to belong to the sciences while the structuralist methodology, directly deriving from the *Course*, functioned as a reliable tool that could be used to systematize everything, starting from language, through literature and art to the structures of kinship. Semiology, on the other hand, also projected in the *Course* (with Peirce's semiotics), developed into a meta-language integrating different fields of knowledge. Semioticians of culture shared an assumption based on the *Course* that linguistic signs make a universal pattern which helps to understand the functioning of all other sign systems and the verbocentric view on culture where the natural language is the matrix and the linguistics is the scientific "base".

Therefore, Saussure's helplessness, who in the song by Magnetic Fields cannot answer what love is, and what is more, denies the sole possibility of explaining the essence of that feeling, is more meaningful than if there were any other scholar in his position.

It is the scientificity and systemicity of structuralism, the "bulldozer" of the humanities, that shuts it off from the delicate and

beautiful “orchid” of feelings. The sole existence of the escaping rationalisation and disambiguation (“No understanding” / “No closure”) of love seem to be gods’ revenge (“nemesis”), a punishment for the arrogance of the scientist, who achieved his success at the expense of simplifying the reality.

The lyrics of the refrain based on an anti-thesis, syntactic parallelism and numerous lexical and phonetic repetitions are assigned to Saussure and even more highlight the cognitive futility of artificial systems and formal schemes.

He said...
So we don't know anything
You don't know anything
I don't know anything
About love
But we are nothing
You are nothing
I am nothing
Without love

As far as the content plane is concerned, the refrain boils down to ascertaining ignorance about what is the most important and what makes us humans while formally (the expression plane) it resembles a grammar exercise (inflection system). There is no need to remind that the dichotomy of expression plane and content plane which is the basis of literary structuralism updates the Saussurean opposition of *signifiant-signifié*. According to the structuralist theory of language, the meaning as *signifié* is an intra-language element, words have meanings only because of structural relations, being mutually entangled.

Thus, there is no specified meaning, idea or content in the term “love”. Everything that can be said about love is closed in the structure of language, and in the language there are only differences after all.

The title death of Saussure mentioned in the next part of the song has – as it could be said – an ironic-autothematic dimension. Shooting at the linguist, the composer as if acts in the name of the whole music industry, here represented by the song-writing team Holland-Dozier-Holland,¹⁰ which created for the famous record company of Motown such hits of the group Supremes as *Baby Love* or *Stop! In the Name of Love*.

10
What is meant is
Lamont Dozier and
bothers Brian and
Eddie Holland

*I'm just a great composer
And not a violent man
But I lost my composure
And I shot Ferdinand
Crying "it's well and kosher
To say you don't understand
But this is for Holland-Dozier-Holland"*

Conspicuous in the lyrics are the phonetic efforts relating to Saussure which he called anagrams, but here the proper name is not so much coded as exposed. Merritt plays with Saussure's last name by rhyming composer/composure, but most of all by emphasizing sound similarity between Saussure and so sure as well as the name Ferdinand and the verb understand. As a lead singer, Merritt emphasises the sureness included in the name of the precursor of structuralism by saying, or rather signing, in English “Saussure” and “so sure”. To be more precise, the area of phonetic similarities in specific verses is bigger and includes contradictions as well: “I met Ferdinand de Saussure”/“I'm not so sure, „shot Ferdinand”/ “don't understand”. Similarly, the tension

between sureness and unsureness concerns the scientific direction of the Genevan. The *Course in General Linguistics*, signed with the name of Saussure, is an arbitrarily imposed set of rules and definitions which were long taken for granted. In the meantime, the manuscripts as well as the memories of the family and colleagues show a portrait of a scientist who carefully poses questions and is far from final conclusions (Joseph 2012: 361–362). Saussure’s fascination with anagrammatic poetry was also accompanied by hesitation about the status and extent of the phonetic repetitions he had noticed. As everybody knows, the linguist gave up his very advanced research on anagrams because he had not obtained any answer to the question on their usefulness and intentionality, and he was not sure if they were the basis of poetry or rather the outcome of coincidence. This unsureness is shared by many of his followers: “Unfortunately, I do not think there can be a definitive resolution to the question of the anagram’s reality” (Gronas 2009: 188).

A doubtful existence of anagrams together with the scientist’s determination in searching for them not only undermined his image of a serious scientist, but also gave rise to a legend “about an insane professor from Geneva” (Panas 2005: 46), vacillating “between knowledge and delirium” (“entre savoir et délire” [Pierssens 1979: 52]). The motif of the insanity of the structuralist, obsessed with identifying phonetic repetitions (“In his obsession Saussure found anagrams everywhere” [Gronas 2009: 162]) returned in the poem by Krešimir Bagić *la folie de Saussure* (Bagić 2013: 80). It returned literally as the Croatian writer and literary scholar decided to repeat the title of the essay which had given rise to the “psychiatric” way of speaking of the Genevan (Deguy 1969: 20–26). The poet also quoted a title formula from of a famous publication by Starobinski, “words below words” (*Les mots sous les mots*). As in Stephin Merritt’s lyrics, in Bagić’s poem we can

find anagrammatic puns with Saussure's last name, but they are very difficult to notice in translation. (Majdzik 2015: 101-102). In order not to risk a more detailed analysis, let me only quote one couplet which could be treated as the shortest summary possible of the up-to-now presence of the Swiss linguist in science.

words are below words
at the end de Saussure (Bagić 2013: 80)¹¹

History has gone full circles. At the beginning, there was the *Course*, the “Vulgate of Saussurim” (“vulgate du saussurisme”) (Rastier 2009), a text without the author which put linguistics on the pedestal of science, then anagrams showing that there is a secret behind every text. Today's saussurology promises to present the authentic Saussure and create perspectives for the development of the true Saussurean linguistics. Let us hope that this time it succeeds in eluding Saussure's “dead-ends” which “predict dead-ends in linguistics” (Todorov 2011: 302).♥

11
 „riječi su pod
 riječima” / „na koncu
 će de saussure”.

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