

The Interpretation of Saussure's Linguistic Ideas in China

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The interpretation of Saussurean ideas in China began later than in the West and in Japan; this is one of the reasons why the debate on the *Cours de linguistique générale* is still open and many articles have been recently published in academic reviews.

In this article I will first provide a brief, historical survey of the reception of Saussure's linguistic view in China up to 1985, then I will shortly illustrate the two existing Chinese translations of the *Cours*, and, finally, I will report on the current debate on Saussurean linguistic views.

1 Saussurean Studies in China until 1985

The most representative studies from the initial period of Saussurean studies are those written by Chen Wangdao and Fang Guangtao. Chen Wangdao's *Xiucixue fafan* (Summary of Rhetoric, 1932) already contained traces of Saussurean theories, even though it did not directly treat linguistic issues. The author defines the language as a system of signs, and, without using the Saussurean terminology or quoting directly the *Cours*, mentioned the two components, social and individual, of the language. In addition to this, the scheme of the communicative process proposed by Chen Wangdao is analogous to the circuit of speech described by Saussure. According to Xu Zhimin (1986), we owe to Chen's *Shuo yuyan* (On Language, 1938) the first introduction in China of some concepts from the *Cours*, among which are the distinction between *langage*, *langue* and *parole*, and the explanation of their differences and mutual relations.

Fang Guangtao, who had studied linguistics in France and personally met some of Saussure's students, like Meillet, was one of the first lecturers in linguistics, and the *Cours* was an important element of his teaching activity. Fang and Chen both actively participated in the debate regarding the grammar

reforms, held between 1938 and 1943. The introduction and usage of foreign linguistic theories were quite relevant in the debate. The themes most closely related to the content of the *Cours* were the theory of sign, the systematicity of the language, and the division between synchrony and diachrony. With regard to the first point, Chen Wangdao underlined the dual essence of the linguistic sign, confirming his acceptance of the Saussurean theory of signifier and signified. The idea of coexistent elements was reaffirmed by Fang Guangtao, who strongly negated the definition of the language as a list of terms. He also wrote a remarkable essay regarding the possibility of a grammar system including classical and vernacular Chinese. According to Xu Zhimin, Chen's and Fang's theories were strongly influenced by the *Cours*.

In the 1950s, Gao Mingkai and Cen Qixiang are among the interpreters of Saussurean theory certainly deserving mention. Gao's *Putong yuyanxue* (1954) was an introductory work, compiled from the notes he used during his lectures in linguistics at the University of Peking. In this book, besides a much stronger influence of Soviet linguistics, we also find evidence of the Saussurean linguistic view. According to Masini "Saussure was a fundamental model for Gao Mingkai, as for many other European scholars. Saussure not only influenced the various fields of research in the different branches of linguistics, but also provided a general formulation, a frame of reference for all linguistic research. He contributed to the clarification of the object of linguistics in a period during which the linguistic and grammar research still roamed looking for a method."¹

Cen Qixiang gave general linguistics lessons at the Beijing University the after Gao taught there, and, similarly, used the notes from his lectures to compile a manual of linguistics, entitled *Putong yuyanxue* (1956). In the first part of this book, the author presented and criticized Saussurean linguistics. According to him, it was useless and impossible to separate *langue* and *parole* and their related fields. The criticism expressed by Cen Qixiang was shared by other linguists at that time, and, although it reflected a partial understanding of the *Cours*, it is worth mentioning, because it covered themes recurring in the Chinese literature on this subject. Saussure was accused of psychologism because in his view neither the significant nor the signified were characterize by material covering. Moreover, in the priority Saussure attributed to synchronic study, many Chinese linguists saw the root of the antihistoricist approach to science. Nevertheless, it is interesting to notice that Cen's course textbook, published by

¹ Masini Federico, "F. de Saussure e gli studi di linguistica generale nella Repubblica popolare cinese", *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, 1985- 39, p. 31.

Beijing University in 1956, was actually the first translation of the *Cours*, even though neither the author's name nor the title appeared on it. As Masini noticed, "Saussure's name appears only in Bally and Sechehaye's notes, entirely translated. Only the order of the parts has been upset, the edition is almost unabridged, the missing parts are only the appendix 'Principles of Phonology' and the paragraph 'A Brief Survey of the History of Linguistics'. (...) Saussure's theoretical thought influence, although not officially recognized by the linguistic publications, is so strong that the translation of the *Cours* becomes the essential text of the course in general linguistics."² Nevertheless, Cen continued criticizing Saussure in the following years.

A step forward was represented by Gui Lankun's interpretation of the *Cours*. In a short article published in 1962, Gui correctly explained Saussure's conception of value, and his distinction between associative and syntagmatic relations. During the academic year 1961/62, Ye Feisheng gave the first series of lectures on Saussure, followed in 1964 by Gao Mingkai.

Immediately before beginning his course, Gao was writing a long essay, supposedly the introduction to his own Chinese translation of the *Cours*. Unfortunately, due to the deterioration of his health conditions, Gao could not complete the translation, and both the introductory essay and the translation were published almost twenty years after his death (1965). However, his essay represented the first monography on Saussure. It was divided into six parts: Saussure's biography and bibliography, the *Cours*' content, positive aspects of the *Cours*, negative aspects, influence on the subsequent linguistics, and translation of the *Cours* into other languages. The third part contained observations that partially negated the previous criticisms. Nevertheless, in the fourth part of the essay, the Saussurean linguistic view is strongly criticized.

Gao's criticism of idealism addressed Saussure's conception of sign. He thinks that "the fact that on one hand Saussure emphasizes the function of social forces in combining these two elements, on the other hand says that the union is mysterious not only reveals the internal contradiction of his theory, but also its idealism."³ This Chinese linguist also disagrees on the differential, negative definition of sign: according to him, what constitutes something is first of all determined by its internal features. Gao also criticizes Saussure's conception of system. The priority given to the system compared with the single element is seen as a consequence of the idealistic absolutism. In this part of the essay, Gao also stresses

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ Gao Mingkai, "De Suoxu'er he tade Putong yuyanxue jiaocheng", *Yuyanxue Luncong*, 1980- 6, p. 179.

the negative influence of Saussurean theory on the schools of linguistics that followed. In his opinion, “Saussure’s conception of language as form, not as substance has caused a wrong tendency in modern linguistics, i.e., to substitute the organic and complete study of linguistic system for the study of linguistic structure, after having broken the structural relations of language from the association of these relations.”⁴ The interpretation of Saussure’s diachronic and synchronic distinction is seen as responsible of having originated an anti-historical current in linguistics. On one hand, Saussure is charged with the mistakes of atomism made by the linguists of the historical-comparative school, and, on the other hand, he is accused for the anti-historical approach of the structuralist school, developed after his death. It is therefore interesting to notice that not only are the third and the fourth part of the essay strongly contradictory, but also the critical arguments expressed contradict one another. In Gao’s opinion, Saussure, criticizing the traditional division between lexicon and grammar, confused the two fields and caused the structuralist depreciation of lessical studies. Aware of the great influence of the Saussurean linguistic view, Gao stressed the need of an analysis of Saussure’s theory, because “the merits and the mistakes of every school of modern linguistics are, to some degree, the merits and the mistakes of Saussurean theory of language and linguistics.”⁵

As I have tried to illustrate, this essay still reflects a contradictory and immature interpretation of Saussurean ideas, but it well represents the approach towards Western theories shared by many scholars at that time. They were strongly influenced by these new theories, especially in theoretical linguistics, a field that was never really investigated in China, but, on the other hand, the contemporary influence of Soviet linguistics and the particular political situation prevented them from openly accept Western theories.

Gao’s essay, written in 1963, marked the end of the first phase of Saussurean studies. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution interrupted linguistic studies, which were resumed near the end of the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s. An article by Xu Zhimin, published in 1980, seems to be the beginning of a new era in Saussurean Chinese studies. More attention was paid to the compilation of the Saussurean *Cours* and to the problems related to the editors’ work. Most of the criticism previously raised against Saussure was denied by Xu Zhimin, who was the first to demonstrate the preposterousness of Saussure’s anti-historicism, directly quoting the excerpts from the *Cours* concerning the relations

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

between synchrony and diachrony.⁶ In the same year, Gao's translation was published and the *Cours* became finally available to the Chinese readers. Another important step forward was represented by Suo Zhenyu's article on the concept of value, published in 1983. According to the author, that at that time was teaching linguistics at Beijing University and can be considered an authority in Saussurean Chinese studies, the notion of value had often been misunderstood by Chinese linguists, as proven by Gao's and Cen's criticism. Suo Zhenyu confirmed the need to start from the differences to define linguistic entities, denying the importance attached to the material features of these entities.⁷ In the same year, another linguist, Xu Guozhang, devoted his attention to the two critical editions of Godel and De Mauro, starting a very useful philological research that contributed to clarify the misunderstanding due to a mere reading of the *Cours*.⁸

2 The Chinese Translations of the *Cours*

The history of the Chinese interpretation of the *Cours* began in the 1930s when the Japanese version of the book started circulating in China. As it is known, this was the first translation of the book, made by Hideo Kobayashi and published in Tokyo in 1928, and it often appears in the bibliographies of the first Chinese studies of general linguistics.⁹

⁶ See Xu Zhimin, "Suoxu'er de yuyan lilun", *Fudan daxue zengkan yuyanxue wenzi zhuanji*, 1980, pp. 31- 39.

⁷ See Suo Zhenyu, "De Suoxu'er de yuyan jiazhi lilun", *Xinjiang daxue xuebao*, 1983- 2, pp. 123- 129.

⁸ See Xu Guozhang, "Guanyu Suoxu'er de liangben shu", *Guowai yuyanxue*, 1983- 1, pp. 1-18. In 1983 the same review also published the Chinese translation of De Mauro's introduction to the *Cours*.

⁹ As Wang Xijie writes, "The first Chinese scholars, apart from those who studied in France as Wang Li, Fang Guangtao, Cen Qixiang and Gao Mingkai and directly read the French text, all received and introduced Saussurean ideas through the Japanese version" (Wang Xijie, "Bawo zhenshide Suoxu'er, zhongshi tade xueshu shengmingli", *Gannan shifanxueyuan xuebao*, 2004-4, pp. 78- 82).

In 1962- 63, Fang Guangtao selected and translated parts of the Japanese *Cours*,¹⁰ eventually published in 1980's in *Yufa lungao* (1990) and *Fang Guangtao yuyanxue lunwenji* (1997) under the title of *Suoxu'er "Yiban yuynxue jiaocheng"*.¹¹ In 1976, parts of the *Cours*, translated by Su Rongqiang, were serialized in the review "Jianghan luntan".

The first complete translation of the *Cours* was published only in 1980 by the publishing house Commercial Press, although the translator, Gao Mingkai, as I mentioned earlier, had completed the translation much earlier, in 1963, comparing the French text with translations already done in Russian, English, German and Japanese. Gao's version, revised first by Cen Qixiang and then by Ye Feisheng, is based on the fifth edition of the *Cours*. In the last twenty years, it has been the most important tool available to Chinese readers for the study of Saussurean theories. In this book, the table of content is followed by a short introduction written by Cen Qixiang in 1979, which introduces Saussure's biography and the reasons why the *Cours* exerted such a great influence on so many fields. Cen Qixiang briefly included his personal opinions, confirming a rather critical position toward Saussurean linguistics. Following Cen's introduction, there is the preface to the first edition, and short prefaces to the next two editions, written by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, the editors of the *Cours*. At the end of the translation, we find an index including the linguistic terminology, and the names of the most important linguists transliterated into Chinese. Following the index, two more notes are included by Cen Qixiang, specifying which edition the Chinese translation was based on, and explaining the purpose of the footnotes he and Ye Feisheng, the other editor, added.

Another Chinese version was published in 2001 by the publishing house Jiangsu Jiaoyu, edited and translated by Pei Wen, and likewise based on the fifth edition of the *Cours*.

The translator's introduction is quite lengthy and is divided into three parts: the first one includes Saussure's biography with a detailed description of his studies and works, an explanation of the relationship between Saussure's and other linguists, and of the role played by the *Cours* in the development of modern linguistics. In the second part the translator introduces the problems connected

¹⁰ As Masako Naito (1995) noticed, although Fang could understand French, unlike his colleagues who usually used the Russian translation, he always quoted the Japanese version of the *Cours*. See Naito in De Mauro and Sugeta, *Saussure and Linguistics Today*, 1995, Bulzoni, Roma.

¹¹ This work was made possible largely due to the compilation work of Luxue Hai and Fang Hua.

with the compilation of the *Cours* and briefly presents the works of Godel, Engler, De Mauro and Slusareva. The third part is dedicated to the Chinese translations of the *Cours* and provides some information on the previous ones. Unfortunately, apart from saying which edition the translation is based on — i.e., the fifth — and describing the reasons of this choice, Pei Wen does not say much about the innovations we find in her new translation. For instance, she chose to include the page number of the French text, according to the pagination followed since the second edition of the *Cours*. In her book, the introduction is followed by the table of contents, the preface to the fifth edition, the three prefaces of Bally and Sechehaye, the translation of the *Cours*, and, at the end, an index including the linguistic terminology and the names of the most important linguists transliterated into Chinese.

The two aspects in which Gao's and Pei's versions are most different are the translation of Saussurean terminology and the translation criterion adopted.

Regarding Saussure's *Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics*,¹² two Chinese translations are available. The first one was made by Zhang Shaojie, on the English version of the *Cours*, and was published in 2001 by Hunan Jiaoyu publishing house. The second one was made by Tu Youxiang, on the French version, and was published in 2002 by Shanghai Renmin publishing house.

3 The Current Debate on the *Cours*

The increasing number of translations, monographs, and articles confirms the interest manifested by Chinese scholars towards Saussurean linguistic ideas.

In the initial phase of Saussurean reception, when Chinese linguists were heavily influenced by Soviet linguistics, the development of the debate on the *Cours* was strongly affected by the application of Marxist categories, whereas, recently, the interpretations have been based on purely linguistic theoretical criteria. This change of tendency is particularly evident in the treatment of issues such as *langue* and *parole*. The debate regarding the conceptual pair was one of the first that arose from the reading of the *Cours*, it took off between 1958 and 1964 between Gao Mingkai, who claimed that the *langue* did not

¹² *Troisième Cours de linguistique générale (1910- 1911): d'après les cahiers d'Emile Constantin = Saussure's Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1910-1911) : from the Notebooks of Emile Constantin /* French text edited by Eisuke Komatsu ; English translation by Roy Harris, 1993, Pergamon Press, Oxford.

own class nature while *parole* did, and Fang Guangtao, who refuted Gao's position. In the following years, almost every Chinese scholar held the necessity of a distinction between *langue* and *parole*, dealing with issues such as the definition of their fields, their differences and mutual relations, and their class nature. Recently, the theme is still discussed but the terms adopted and the points of view have changed.

Cen Yunqiang is the author of an article concerning the origin, essence and meaning of linguistics of *parole* (1999), which was followed by another study on the definition, content and methodology of the same field (2000).¹³ Cen Yunqiang has always stressed the need to explore the domain of *parole*, as its heterogeneity reflects a vision that implies continuous interactions between different sciences. He tried to find out why the field of *parole* had always been neglected. Not only is an extensive treatment absent in Saussure's *Cours*, similarly, the later schools of linguistics did not develop these studies. One reason could be the misunderstanding of Saussure's position on the topic, as if he meant to exclude this field from linguistics. Moreover, an inherent difficulty exists in this kind of research, which crosses the borders of many sciences and does not fit easily into schematization. The formalistic view of language prevailed for a long time and determined the general orientation of linguistics. Nevertheless, the recent development of many branches of linguistics seem able to fill in the gap: sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, neurolinguistics, pragmatics and textlinguistics are just a few examples.

Unlike from the definition found in the *Cours*, Cen Yunqiang thinks that speech includes both the social and the individual component, not only the latter. With regard to the theories about the relation between *langue* and *parole* proposed by Chinese linguists, i.e. as the relation between abstract and concrete, or between general and particular, or between an instrument and its use, Cen Yunqiang prefers this last conceptual pair, stating that the *langue* is an instrument because it is static and homogeneous, while the *parole* is the use of that instrument because it is dynamic and heterogeneous. He also attempted to indicate what belongs to the field of language and what to the field of speech, asserting that while the units below sentence level (phoneme, syllable, plereme, sememe, morpheme, word and word group) belong to the *langue*, those above sentence level (flow of speech, group of sentences, text) belong to the field of *parole*. The reason lies in the essence of *parole*, which is the result of a people's use of the linguistic system in a defined linguistic context to express a defined meaning. The study of the act and

¹³ Both articles were published in the academic review *Yuyan wenzixue*.

process of speaking also belongs to this field, while the study of sentence patterns pertains to the field of the language.

Yao Xiaoping gave an interesting contribution to the debate on *langue* and *parole*.¹⁴ From textual comparison, he gathers some definitions according to which the *langue* can be interpreted as any language, including any variants of human language (such as a particular kind of language or dialect), and as linguistic system. As linguistic system, the *langue* has the following features: it is social, a collective product, abstract, a psychological reality, an instrument necessary for the practical exercise of the speaking faculty; it is also passively developed by the individual, an essential part of the faculty of language, and should be seen as the only subject of study of linguistics. Yao's definition of *parole* is certainly less exhaustive. According to him, it can indicate both the product of every practical act of speech, and the sum of the utterances; it is individual, concrete, heterogeneous, active, changing and historical. Compared with Cen Yunqiang, Yao seems more sceptical about the possibility of a linguistics of *parole*, and raised the following questions: Which should be the subject of such a science? The speech alone or also part of the language as faculty? Does it feature a unified theoretical frame and methodological system? Given its heterogeneity, Yao Xiaoping argued that a linguistics of *parole* cannot be constructed.

A very interesting contribution to the debate was given by Zhang Xiaoke.¹⁵ The originality of his approach lies in applying Saussurean theory to the context of Chinese linguistics and showing the delicate relation between norm and use. Despite how the origin of all language change is found in speech, should we passively accept everything that appears in speech? What is the standard for considering something as acceptable or not? One of the most important and urgent tasks of the Chinese government after the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, was to standardize the language. What this process entailed is not easily described in a few words, but it can be summarized as the promulgation and diffusion of simplified characters, and the decision to adopt the Beijing dialect as the linguistic standard. Zhang starts by quoting one of the most recent laws on linguistic standardization. Subsequently, he lists several cases of common linguistic usage, which are wrong from the perspective of phonetics, lexicon, grammar and writing rules. The answer Zhang gives to the question of the 'acceptability' is that "some

¹⁴ See Yao Xiaoping, "Yandu Suoxu'er," *Waiyu Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu*, 2003-5, pp. 387- 394.

¹⁵ See Zhang Xiaoke, "Yuyan he yanyu de qufen yu yuyan wenzi guifanhua", *Guangxi Minzu Xueyuan Xuebao*, 2003- 5, pp. 101- 106.

changes that appear in speech deserve our confirmation, others are wrong or not rational.”¹⁶ Regarding changes in pronunciation, he thinks that a strict standard should exist, since phonetic systematicness is very strong, and changing one thing produces effects in the whole system.

With regard to the creation of new words, Zhang holds that we should accept those indicating new concepts or objects, and discard those that prove to be unnecessary or incomprehensible. As for the description of language included in grammar books, the task is even more difficult: grammarians should neither simply deny a usage already established, nor legitimize every individual and temporary linguistic novelty. Apart from offering a practical application of Saussurean views, Zhang also stresses the responsibility of the mass-media in the change of linguistic usage. Many of the examples he gives are taken from newspapers or television programs.

Saussure proposed another fundamental distinction; i.e., that between the diachronic and synchronic state of language. The articles recently written by Chinese linguists on this topic show a very clear distance from the previous, critical positions, and demonstrate that a new, more mature phase of Saussurean studies has begun in China. Zhao Ronghui, in a recent publication, writes that “Most Chinese scholars give a high assessment to this Saussurean theory and understand that the purpose of the distinction between synchrony and diachrony lies in the overcoming of the shortcomings of the previous schools of linguistics, and in the clarification of the object of linguistic studies (...). According to the data we collected, Chinese scholars in the last ten years published many articles on the problem of synchrony and diachrony (over 500). Most of them are practical applications of this methodological principle and relate to semantics, phonetics, rhetoric, dialectology, philosophy, literature and music. The interpretation of the theory does not present evident discrepancy.”¹⁷

In articles like Xu Siyi's,¹⁸ we can already see the remarkable progress made in this field. The priority given by Saussure to synchrony is no longer seen as the denial of history or of time intervention, but as a methodological ‘strategy.’¹⁹ Moreover, Xu Siyi applies the distinction to the study of Chinese language,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁷ Zhao Ronghui, *Suoxu'er zai Zhongguo*, Shangwu Yinshuguan, Beijing, 2005, pp. 34- 36.

¹⁸ Xu Siyi, “Lun yuyan de gongshixing he lishixing”, in Zhao Ronghui, 2005, pp. 229- 245.

¹⁹ See also Jing Yanjun. “Yuyanxue zhong de fei duicheng eryuanxing,” *Suzhou zhiye Daxue Xuebao*, 2004- 4, pp. 100- 101.

criticizing those who claim, on the basis of Chinese language continuity, not to distinguish the plans of research.

Another brilliant analysis of the *Cours* was elaborated by Suo Zhenyu, Professor of general linguistics at Beijing University. His faithful reports on Saussure's *Cours* focus on the first three parts. I find the connection shown between the synchronic perspective and the definition of a new grammar very interesting. Synchronic linguistics, whose subject is a linguistics state, coincides with grammar, including lexicology. Suo, aware of the novelty of such a conception, wrote that "Saussure, in criticizing the traditional divisions of grammar, broke the schemes through which traditional linguistics divided grammar into syntax and morphology, putting all the grammatical material on two axis, syntagmatic and paradigmatic."²⁰

Zhang Fucui's analysis starts from the consideration of time in linguistic studies.²¹ According to this scholar, Chinese linguistic research lacked the concept of time for a long period, and the first linguist to fill this gap was Saussure. In his opinion, Saussurean work is imbued with the strong awareness of the effects of time on language. Even the static level of synchrony is more ideal than real, since it is the product of innumerable changes at the diachronic level, and includes the time element. Therefore, starting from Saussurean preconditions, Zhang Fucui thinks that "to describe and explain a synchronic linguistic state, we should deeply analyze the diachronic situation of each component, observe their relation and avoid looking at the synchronic state as if it was a static, monolithic block."²²

Shu Chunling, as well, offers an interesting reading of Saussurean theory. She rightly stresses that "since Saussure is aware of the intrinsic historicity of language, he underlines the necessity to distinguish linguistic system and linguistic change, the two facets of linguistic form, the synchronic and diachronic."²³ She also connects this distinction to Saussure's concept of sign, to the mutability and immutability caused by radical arbitrariness. The distinction between synchrony and diachrony has to be

²⁰ Suo Zhenyu, "Suoxu'er de yuyan gongshi miaoxie lilun," *Yuwen Yanjiu*, 1994- 1, p. 13.

²¹ Zhang Fucui, "Shijian guan yu yuyan yanjiu," *Xichang Nongye Gaodeng Zhuanke Xuexiao Xuebao*. 2003- 3, pp. 42- 46.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²³ Shu Chunling, "Suoxu'er gongshi yuyanxue he lishi yuyanxue," *Neimenggu Nongye Daxue Xuebao*. 2004- 2, p. 114.

interpreted, according to her, as methodological, not epistemological. Further, like Suo Zhenyu, she has noticed the importance of such a distinction for grammatical studies.

Over the last twenty years, Chinese linguists have analyzed almost every part of the *Cours* and discussed almost every question connected to it, as the problem of the composition of the book, the Saussurean semiology, and the philosophical formation of Saussure. As I have tried to show, the debate on Saussurean linguistic ideas is still lively and open and the participants in this debate are scholars whose contributions reflect different points of view. Some of them are interesting and original, other less so; however all of them have the merit of being devoted to improving the Chinese interpretation of an important chapter in the history of linguistics.