

Saussure's Theory of Language

Saussure was unhappy with linguistics as he knew it because he thought that his predecessors had failed to think seriously or perceptively about what they were doing. Linguistics, he wrote,¹ "never attempted to determine the nature of the object it was studying, and without this elementary operation a science cannot develop an appropriate method" (*Course*, 3; *Cours*, 16).

This operation is all the more necessary because human language is an extremely complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. Even a single speech act involves an extraordinary range of factors and could be considered from many different, even conflicting points of view. One could study the way sounds are produced by the mouth, vocal chords, and tongue; one could investigate the sound waves that are emitted and the way they affect the hearing mechanism. One could consider the signifying intention of the speaker, the aspects of the world to which his utterance refers, the immediate circumstances of the communicative context that might have led him to produce a particular series of noises. One

¹I use expressions such as "Saussure wrote" purely for convenience. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, very few passages of the *Course* were actually written by Saussure.