

consequences for other disciplines besides linguistics, for it is essentially a distinction between institution and event, between the underlying system that makes possible various types of behavior and actual instances of such behavior. Study of the system leads to the construction of models that represent forms, their relations to one another, and their possibilities of combination, whereas study of actual behavior or events would lead to the construction of statistical models that represent the probabilities of particular combinations under various circumstances.

In our discussion of semiotics in chapter 4 we shall see how the notion of *langue* has been extended to other fields. Within linguistics itself, though, study of *la langue* involves an inventory of the distinctions that create signs and of rules of combination, whereas study of *parole* would lead to an account of language use, including the relative frequencies with which particular forms or combinations of forms were used in actual speech. By separating *langue* from *parole* Saussure gave linguistics a suitable object of study and thus a much clearer sense of what it was doing: if one focused on language as a system, then one knew what one was trying to reconstruct and could, within this perspective, determine what evidence was relevant and how it should be organized.

We shall consider in more detail the structure of the linguistic system, but there is one point about the concept of *la langue* which should be stressed here. Saussure's editors organized the *Course* so that it began with the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Saussure was thus portrayed as saying that language is a confused mass of heterogeneous facts, and the only way to make sense of it is to postulate the existence of something called the linguistic system and to set aside everything else. The distinction has thus seemed extremely questionable to many people: a postulate that had to be accepted on faith if one were to proceed. But in fact, as Saussure's notes suggest and as the sequence of argument

which we have adopted here should have demonstrated, the distinction between *langue* and *parole* is a logical and necessary consequence of the arbitrary nature of the sign and the problem of identity in linguistics. In brief: if the sign is arbitrary then, as we have seen, it is a purely relational entity, and if we wish to define and identify signs we must look to the system of relations and distinctions which create them. We must therefore distinguish between the various substances in which signs are manifested and the actual forms which constitute signs; and when we do this what we have isolated is a system of forms which underlies actual linguistic behavior or manifestation. This system of forms is *la langue*; the attempt to study signs leads us, inexorably, to take this as the proper object of linguistic investigation. The isolation of *la langue* is not, as the published *Course* may suggest, an arbitrary point of departure but a consequence of the nature of signs themselves.

~~Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives~~

~~There is another important consequence of the arbitrary nature of the sign which has also been treated by Saussure's critics as a questionable and unnecessary imposition. This is the distinction between the *synchronic* study of language (study of the linguistic system in a particular state, without reference to time) and the *diachronic* study of language (study of its evolution in time). It has been suggested that in distinguishing rigorously between these two perspectives and in granting priority to the synchronic study of language, Saussure was ignoring, or at least setting aside, the fact that a language is fundamentally historical and contingent, an entity in constant evolution. But, on the contrary, it was precisely because he recognized, more profoundly than his critics, the radical historicity of language that he asserted the importance of dis-~~