

might try to analyze the conventions that enable speaker and listeners to understand one another, working out the grammatical and semantic rules that they must have assimilated if they are to communicate in this way. Or again, one could trace the history of the language that makes available these particular forms at this time.

Confronted with all these phenomena and these different perspectives from which one might approach them, the linguist must ask what one is trying to describe. What in particular is one looking at or looking for? What, in short, is language?

Saussure's answer to this question is unexceptionable but extremely important, since it serves to direct attention to essentials. Language is a system of signs. Noises count as language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas; otherwise they are just noise. And for noises to express or communicate ideas they must be part of a system of conventions that relate noises to ideas. They must, in other words, be part of a system of signs. The sign is the union of a form which signifies, which Saussure calls the *signifiant* (signifier), and an idea signified, the *signifié* (signified). Though we may speak of signifier and signified as if they were separate entities, they exist only as components of the sign. The sign is the central fact of language, and therefore in trying to separate what is essential from what is secondary or incidental we must start from the nature of the sign itself, its primary characteristics.

The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign

The first principle of Saussure's theory of language concerns the essential quality of the sign. The linguistic sign is arbitrary. A particular combination of signifier and signified is an arbitrary entity. This enigmatic principle, if properly under-

stood, is central to one's conception of language and linguistic method.

No one contests the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign it its rightful place. The above principle dominates the whole of linguistic analysis of a language. Its consequences are innumerable, though they are not all, it is true, equally evident right away. It is after many detours that one discovers them, and with them the fundamental importance of this principle. (*Course*, 68; *Cours*, 100)

What does Saussure mean by the arbitrary nature of the sign? In one sense the answer is quite simple. There is no natural or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified. Since I speak English I may use the signifier represented by *dog* to talk about an animal of a particular species, but this sequence of sounds is no better suited to that purpose than another sequence. *Lod*, *tet*, or *bloop* would serve equally well if it were accepted by members of my speech community. There is no intrinsic reason why one of these signifiers rather than another should be linked with the concept of a "dog." (Note that here, as throughout, I use italics to cite linguistic forms [e.g., *dog*, *lod*] and quotation marks to designate meanings [e.g., "dog"].)

Are there no exceptions to this basic principle? Certainly. There are two ways in which linguistic signs may be motivated, that is to say, made less arbitrary. First, there are cases of onomatopoeia, where the sound of the signifier seems in some way mimetic or imitative, as in the English *bow-wow* or *arf-arf* (cf. French *ouâ-ouâ*, German *wau-wau*, Italian *bau-bau*). But there are few such cases, and the fact that we identify them as a separate class and special case only emphasizes more strongly that ordinary signs are arbitrary.