

with a given concept might be modified; and a given sequence of sounds could be attached to a different concept. Occasionally, of course, a new sign would have to be introduced for a new concept which had been produced by changes in the world. But the concepts themselves, as language-independent entities, would not be subject to linguistic evolution. In fact, though, the history of languages is full of examples of concepts shifting, changing their boundaries. The English word *cattle*, for example, at one point meant property in general, then gradually came to be restricted to four-footed property (a new category), and finally attained its modern sense of domesticated bovines. Or again, a "silly" person was once happy, blessed, and pious. Gradually this particular concept altered; the old concept of "silliness" transformed itself, and by the beginning of the sixteenth century a silly person was innocent, helpless, even deserving of pity. The alteration of the concept continued until, eventually, a silly person was simple, foolish, perhaps even stupid.

If language were a nomenclature we should be obliged to say that there exist a number of distinct concepts and that the signifier *silly* was attached first to one and then to another. But clearly this is not what happened: the concept attached to the signifier *silly* was continually shifting its boundaries, gradually changing its semantic shape, articulating the world in different ways from one period to the next. And, incidentally, the signifier also evolved, undergoing a modification of its central vowel.

What is the significance of this? What does it have to do with the arbitrary nature of the sign? Language is not a nomenclature and therefore its signifieds are not pre-existing concepts but changeable and contingent concepts which vary from one state of a language to another. And since the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, since there is no necessary reason for one concept rather than another to be attached to a given signifier, there is therefore no defining

property which the concept must retain in order to count as the signified of that signifier. The signified associated with a signifier can take any form; there is no essential core of meaning that it must retain in order to count as the proper signified for that signifier. The fact that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary means, then, that since there are no fixed universal concepts or fixed universal signifiers, the signified itself is arbitrary, and so is the signifier. We then must ask, as Saussure does, what defines a signifier or a signified, and the answer leads us to a very important principle: both signifier and signified are purely relational or differential entities. Because they are arbitrary they are relational. This is a principle that requires explanation.

The Nature of Linguistic Units

Saussure attaches great importance—more so than it would appear from the published *Course*—to the fact that language is not a nomenclature, for unless we grasp this we cannot understand the full ramifications of the arbitrary nature of the sign. A language does not simply assign arbitrary names to a set of independently existing concepts. It sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound in a distinctive way, but each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus "arbitrary" way of organizing the world into concepts or categories.

It is obvious that the sound sequences of *fleuve* and *rivière* are signifiers of French but not of English, whereas *river* and *stream* are English but not French. Less obviously, but more significantly, the organization of the conceptual plane is also different in English and French. The signified "river" is op-