

units whose value depends on their relations with one another. As Saussure says, generalizing the point:

in all cases, then, we discover not *ideas* given in advance but *values* emanating from the system. When we say that these values correspond to concepts, it is understood that these concepts are purely differential, not positively defined by their content but negatively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not. (*Course*, 117; *Cours*, 162)

Brown is what is not red, black, gray, yellow, etc., and the same holds for each of the other signifieds.

This is a major though paradoxical consequence of the arbitrary nature of the sign, and we shall return to it shortly. But perhaps the easiest way to grasp this notion of the purely relational nature of linguistic units is to approach it from another angle.

Consider the problem of identity in linguistics: the question of when two utterances or portions of an utterance count as examples of a single linguistic unit. Suppose someone tells me, "I bought a bed today," and I reply, "What sort of bed?" What do we mean when we say that the same sign has been employed twice in this brief conversation? What is the basis on which we can claim that two examples or instances of the same linguistic unit have appeared in our dialogue? Note that I have already begged the question in transcribing a portion of the noises that each of us made as *bed*. In fact, the actual noises which were produced will have been measurably different—different from a purely physical and acoustic point of view. Voices vary; after a very few words we can recognize a friend's voice on the telephone because the actual physical signals she emits are different from those of our other acquaintances.

My interlocutor and I produced different noises, yet we want to say that we have produced the same signifier, used the same sign. The signifier, then, is not the same thing as the noises that either he or I produced. It is an abstract unit of some kind, not to be confused with the actual sequence of sounds. But what sort of unit is it? Of what does the unit consist? We might approach this question by asking how far the actual noises produced could vary and still count as versions of the same signifier. This, of course, is similar to the question we implicitly asked about the signified: how far can a color vary and still count as brown? And the answer for the signifier is very similar to the answer for the signified. The noises made can vary considerably (there is no essential property which they must possess), so long as they do not become confused with those of contrasting signifiers. We have considerable latitude in the way we utter *bed*, so long as what we say is not confused with *bad*, *bud*, *bid*, *bode*; *bread*, *bled*, *dead*, *fed*, *head*, *led*, *red*, *said*, *wed*; *beck*, *bell*, *bet*.

In other words, it is the distinctions which are important, and it is for this reason that linguistic units have a purely relational identity. The principle is not easy to grasp, but Saussure offers a concrete analogy. We are willing to grant that in an important sense the 8:25 Geneva-to-Paris Express is the same train each day, even though the coaches, locomotive, and personnel change from one day to the next. What gives the train its identity is its place in the system of trains, as indicated by the timetable. And note that this relational identity is indeed the determining factor: the train remains the same train even if it leaves a half-hour late. In fact, it might always leave late without ceasing to be the 8:25 Geneva-to-Paris Express. What is important is that it be distinguished from, say, the 10:25 Geneva-to-Paris Express, the 8:40 Geneva-to-Dijon Local, and so on.

Another analogy Saussure uses to illustrate the notion of relational identity is the comparison between language and