

chess. The basic units of chess are obviously king, queen, rook, knight, bishop, and pawn. The actual physical shape of the pieces and the material from which they are made is of no importance. The king may be of any size and shape, as long as there are ways of distinguishing it from other pieces. The two rooks need not be of identical size and shape, so long as they can be distinguished from other pieces. Thus, as Saussure points out, if a piece is lost from a chess set we can replace it with any other sort of object, provided always that this object will not be confused with the objects representing pieces of a different value (*Course*, 110; *Cours*, 153-54). The actual physical properties of pieces are of no importance, so long as there are differences of some kind—any kind will do—between pieces which have a different value.

Thus one can say that the units of the game of chess have no material identity: there are no physical properties necessary to a king or pawn. Identity is wholly a function of differences within a system. If we now apply the analogy to language we shall be in a position to understand Saussure's paradoxical claim that in the system of a language "there are only differences, with no positive terms" (*Course*, 120; *Cours*, 166). Normally, when we think of differences we presuppose two things that differ, but Saussure's point is that signifier and signified are not things in this sense. Just as we cannot say anything about what a pawn must look like, except that it will be different from knight, rook, and so on, so the signifier which we represent as *bed* is not defined by any particular noises used in uttering it. Not only do the actual noises differ from one case to another, but English could be arranged so that noises now used to express the signifier *pet* were used for the signifier *bed*, and vice versa. If these changes were made, the units of the language would be expressed differently; but they would still be fundamentally the same units (the same differences remain, both on the level of the signifier and on the level of the signified), and the lan-

guage would still be English. Indeed, English would remain, in an important sense, the same language if the units of the signifier were never expressed in sound but only in visual symbols of some kind.

In saying this I am obviously making a distinction between units of the linguistic system and their actual physical manifestations or realizations. Before discussing this very important distinction in greater detail, it may be useful to recapitulate the line of reasoning that led to it. We began by noting that there was no natural link between signifier and signified, and then, trying to explain the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, we saw that both signifier and signified were arbitrary divisions or delimitations of a continuum (a sound spectrum on the one hand and a conceptual field on the other). This led us to infer that both signifier and signified must be defined in terms of their relations with other signifiers and signifieds, and thus we reached the conclusion that if we are to define the units of a language, we must distinguish between these purely relational and abstract units and their physical realizations. The actual sounds we produce in speaking are not in themselves units of the linguistic system, nor is the physical color which we designate in calling a book "brown" the same thing as the linguistic unit (the signified, or concept) "brown." In both cases, and this is a point on which Saussure rightly insists, the linguistic unit is form rather than substance, defined by the relations that set it off from other units.

Langue and Parole

Here, in the distinction between the linguistic system and its actual manifestations, we have reached the crucial opposition between *langue* and *parole*. *La langue* is the system of a language, the language as a system of forms, whereas *parole* is