

actual speech, the speech acts that are made possible by the language. *La langue* is what individuals assimilate when they learn a language, a set of forms or "hoard deposited by the practice of speech in speakers who belong to the same community, a grammatical system which, to all intents and purposes, exists in the mind of each speaker" (*Course*, 13-14; *Cours*, 30). "It is the social product whose existence permits the individual to exercise his linguistic faculty" (Engler, 31). *Parole*, on the other hand, is the "executive side of language," and for Saussure involves both "the combinations by which the speaker uses the code of the linguistic system in order to express his own thoughts" and "the psychophysical mechanisms which permit him to externalize these combinations" (*Course*, 14; *Cours*, 31). In the act of *parole* the speaker selects and combines elements of the linguistic system and gives these forms a concrete phonic and psychological manifestation, as sounds and meanings.

If these remarks on *parole* seem somewhat confusing it is because they contain a problem, to which we shall return. If the combination of linguistic elements belongs to *parole*, then syntactic rules have an ambiguous status. To make *la langue* a system of forms and *parole* the combination and externalization of these forms is not quite the same as making *langue* the linguistic faculty and *parole* the exercise of that faculty, for the linguistic faculty includes knowledge of how to combine elements, rules of combination. This latter distinction, between *langue* as system and *parole* as realization, is the more fundamental, both in Saussure and in the Saussurian tradition. However, it is not essential to define here the specific characteristics of *parole*, since, as Saussure makes clear, the principal and strategic function of the distinction between *langue* and *parole* is to isolate the object of linguistic investigation. *La langue*, Saussure argued, must be the linguist's primary concern. What one is trying to do in analyzing a language is not to describe speech acts but to determine the units

and rules of combination which make up the linguistic system. *La langue*, or the linguistic system, is a coherent, analyzable object; "it is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and acoustic images" (*Course*, 15; *Cours*, 32). In studying language as a system of signs, one is trying to identify its essential features: those elements which are crucial to the signifying function of language or, in other words, the elements which are functional within the system in that they create signs by distinguishing them one from another.

The distinction between *langue* and *parole* thus provides a principle of relevance for linguistics. "In separating *langue* from *parole*," Saussure writes, "we are separating what is social from what is individual and what is essential from what is ancillary or accidental" (*Course*, 14; *Cours*, 30). If we tried to study everything related to the phenomenon of speech we would enter a realm of confusion where relevance and irrelevance were extremely difficult to determine; but if we concentrate on *la langue*, then various aspects of language and speech fall into place within or around it. Once we put forward this notion of the linguistic system, then we can ask of every phenomenon whether it belongs to the system itself or is simply a feature of the performance or realization of linguistic units, and we thus succeed in classifying speech facts into groups in which they can profitably be studied.

For example, the distinction between *langue* and *parole* leads to the creation of two distinct disciplines that study sound and its linguistic functions: phonetics, which studies sound in speech acts from a physical point of view, and phonology, which is not interested in physical events themselves but in the distinctions between the abstract units of the signifier which are functional within the linguistic system. (It is important to note here that although Saussure states unequivocally that physical sounds themselves are not part of *la langue* and thus paves the way for the distinction between