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Saussure and Labov: congruencies and divergences

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Abstract: Saussure is a classic and highly considerate linguistic in the human science studies, his work has created a new approach to the linguistic studies that had been, for a long time, working with comparative grammar. Thus, the author had prestige among the intellectuals of his time and has become an icon of reference, so that many linguists have been using his work as basis to their studies, or to develop new approaches to the linguistic studies. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was responsible to confer a specific object to linguistics, the *langue*. The linguist, therefore, marked the history of Modern linguistics, transgressing one whole century of studies which associated the comparison between languages and history, to obtain a “science that contributes around the facts of *langue*”, and only “recognize its truly and only object” (NORMAND, 2009, p.29). In 1916, Saussure’s students edited his courses in general linguistics and transformed them in the book *Course in General Linguistics* which is broadly known and source of study of different linguists. We can notice that by the numerous quotes of Saussure and the CGL in many publications, books, articles, among others. A linguist that has used the CGL to develop his theory was William Labov, professor of linguistics in the University of Pennsylvania, which develops researches in the sociolinguistic area, variation and linguistic change and dialectology. In 1968, Labov, Herzog and Weinreich have launched the book “Empirical foundations for a theory of linguistic change” that has initiated a different approach to the linguistic studies. Otherwise, only in 1972 Labov published the book “Sociolinguistic Patterns”, initializing in fact the sociolinguistic studies with the variation theory and linguistic change. Labov was one of the authors who criticized and developed another theory starting from the saussurian’s ideas. In this paper, we will analyze Labov’s reading of saussurian’s ideas, focusing on the concept of social/individual and of concrete/abstract, analyzing both authors and their main works, as well as the congruencies and divergences we can find in studying these concepts.

1. Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was responsible for giving a specific object to the linguistics, the *langue*. This fact marks the history of modern linguistics when it differs from the studies of the comparative grammars. Thus, we start having a “science formed around the facts of the *langue*”, in order to “identify which is its real and only object” (NORMAND, 2009, p. 29)

In 1916 Saussure's students edited his courses in general linguistics – all of them took part in Geneva – and turned them into the book *Course in General Linguistics*. These students, Bally and Sechehaye, have used the notebooks of the students that attended Saussure's classes, and also some of Saussure's manuscripts, so that they could edit the innovative ideas of the Geneva linguist, these, then, resulted in this book that is widely known and source of many linguistics. We can notice all this repercussion only by the fact that the *CGL* has been translated into more than twenty languages, or by the many articles related to it.

One of these linguistics that has used the *CGL* as the bases of his theory was Labov. Professor of linguistics at *University of Pennsylvania*, he developed researches in the sociolinguistics area, variation, linguistics change and dialectology. In 1968, Labov along with Herzog and Weinreich published the book "Empirical foundations for a theory of language" that began a different approach in the linguistics studies, however it was only in 1972 that Labov published the book "Sociolinguistics Patterns", starting in fact the sociolinguistics and the theory of variation and linguistics change.

We can notice that Labov quotes Saussure in his books, however we see that there is a different reading of Saussure's work, which indicates a way that Labov found to create a different approach in the studies of the linguistics. Therefore, we will highlight the congruencies and divergences we can find concerning the concepts of social and individual and of concrete and abstract which are present in the work of both authors.

2. Saussure

One of the great marks Saussure left to the linguistics was the designation of its object, therefore, we notice that in the third chapter of his posthumous work, there is a whole chapter dedicated, mainly, to the definition of the linguistics' object. In the chapter, subtitled "The object of linguistics", the author talks about "what is both integral and concrete object of linguistics" (SAUSSURE, 1959, p.7). We noticed that to the understanding of the principles of the modern linguistics established after the *CGL*, we first need to understand this third chapter. We confirm this when Norman interrogates what *langue* is and says "Saussure inaugurated what is generally recognized as a radical change in the linguistic field of his time (NORMAN, 2009:34). So, in this chapter the author defines the differences between *langage*, *langue* and *parole*, using one to define the other, leaving the concepts cross-linked.

As I have presented, Saussure looked for the object which would be concrete and integral at the same time. Thereby, it is evident that *langue* is taken from this definition, the author, thus, defines that "Language is concrete, no less so than speaking" (SAUSSURE, 1959, p.15). Besides, when Saussure postulates about the syntagmatic and associative relations and says that "to language rather than to speaking belong the syntagmatic types that are built upon regular forms", the author also says that "there's nothing abstract in language" (SAUSSURE, 1959, p. 125). In other words, we

can find in his work excerpts which lead us to understand that *langue* is abstract, in all passages the *langue*, as far as the *parole*, is defined as concrete.

We find a passage in which Saussure formulates concepts using the word abstract, nevertheless, when talking about abstractions the author doesn't refer to the nature of the *langue*, he uses the word abstraction to explain about the acoustic image, so he says "dans la langue, au contraire, il n'y a plus que l'image visuelle constant. Car si l'on fait abstraction de cette multitude de mouvements nécessaires pour la réaliser dans la parole [...]" (SAUSSURE, 1916, p. 32)

We now focus on the concepts of social and individual which are over quoted in the *CGL* as we can see in the following examples:

Speech has both an individual and a social side, and we cannot conceive of one without the other (SAUSSURE, P.8)

But what is language [langue]? [...] It is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty (p. 9)

In separating language from speaking we are at the same time separating: (1) what is social from what is individual; and (2) what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental (p.14)

Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual. (p. 14)

According to Culler the concept of social is necessary once:

If a difference bears meaning for members of a culture, then there is sign, however abstract, which must be analyzed. For speakers of English, John loves Mary is different in meaning from Mary loves John; therefore the word-order constitutes a sign, a social fact, whereas some physical differences between the way two speakers utter the sentence John loves Mary may bear no meaning and therefore be purely material facts, not social facts. (CULLER, 1976, p. 63)

We can notice, then, that the author is concerned about pointing out the social and individual in the *langage*, the *langue* as social to Saussure can lead us to different interpretations (or misinterpretations), however, in this article we propose to analyze Labov's reading of the concepts concrete/abstract and social/individual.

3. Labov's reading

Labov quotes Saussure in many of his works and develops a new approach which, maybe, Saussure had not even explored. We will discuss what Labov points out of Saussure's work, and what his reading of saussurian concepts were like. These concepts were addressed earlier in this article

The issue of the social and the individual to Labov is mainly discussed in the book which he has written along with Herzog and Weinreich, the authors claim that “Saussure ruptured with the psychologist characteristics of the neogrammarian thought: he saw the *langue* as social and the *parole* as individual”. We can notice in this fragment that the sociolinguistic authors recognize the differences present in the saussurian’s concepts against the studies of Saussure’s time.

However, the three authors highlight the importance of studying the heterogeneous part of the *langue*, meaning the one which is spoken by the members of the society, thus, they say that in the saussurian’s study the “precondition of dealing with a *langue* as a social phenomenon was yet its complete homogeneity” (HERZOG; LABOV; WEINREICH, p. 56), they also add that there is “no indication that Saussure has advanced beyond Hermann Paul in his capacity of leading with a *langue* as a social fact”.

In the book *Sociolinguistic Patterns* Labov presented what he calls the saussurian paradox, so he says “the social aspect of language is studied by observing any one individual, but the individual aspect only by observing language in its social context”, so he concludes that the science of the *parole* has never been developed, while the science of the *langue* has had a lot of success since the last half of the twentieth century. Labov also says:

Yet curiously enough, the linguists who work within the Saussurian tradition (and this includes the great majority) do not deal with social life at all: they work with one or two informants in their offices, or examine their own knowledge of *langue*. Furthermore, they insist that explanations of linguistic facts be drawn from other linguistic facts, not from any “external” data on social behavior. (LABOV, 1972, p.185)

When analyzing these Labov’s words, we can think the following: how would a saussurian work with a social *langue* with only one or two informants, if we only have the *langue* in its totality “if we could embrace the sum of word-images stored in the minds of all individuals, we could identify the social bond that constitutes the language” (SAUSSURE, p. 13) And he adds:

It [the *langue*] is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system that has a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only with a collectivity. (SAUSSURE, 1959, p. 14)

Or as we can affirm that Saussure has not considered the social life if he himself says that the *langue* “is purely social and independent of the individual” (ibidem, p. 18). Therefore, we can see that Labov criticizes the fact that Saussure, according to him, has never developed a science of the *parole*, nevertheless, we can highlight that Saussure has been concerned about clarifying his concepts about *langue* with lots of examples of occurrences of the *parole*. As we can observe, the *CGL* é full of examples in French, German, Greek, English, etc, and also, if we remember the trip that Saussure went to

Lithuania where he studied occurrences of the *parole* from dialects of the people from that region, we notice a work that emphasizes, mainly, the *parole*. These facts ratifies that the heterogeneous, according to Labov, was very present in the saussurian's studies, however, Saussure's object was always the *langue*.

However, Joseph criticizes this Labov's view and so he analyzes it from the fact that "the so-called Saussurean paradox (Labov, 1972, p. 185-7) misconstrues lessons from the Genevan linguist establishing a tension between the potential adequacy of an individual's *parole* to reveal *langue* and the necessity of an interactive *parole* to reveal *langue*" (JOSEPH, 2004, p.87). He also adds that Thibault disarms this conception the sociolinguist has affirming that "the articulation of the 'Saussurean paradox' inadvertently reveals a failure to detect the multiple readings of *langue* outlined by Thibault and to grasp their compatibility with each other" (JOSEPH, 2004, p. 87).

Moreover, Normand affirms that "the social trait is fundamental, but different from the system, it does not determine in Saussure a point of view and a proper method", the author also ensures that the Genevan linguist did not get too far from what said his contemporaries, in other words, he also assured the *langue* is a "social fact", however, according to Normand, this is not considered the "most clarifying characteristics to define the specific nature of the *langue* [...] what really matters to the linguist is that *langue* is a system of signs, an institution that he calls semiology" (NORMAND, 2009, p. 52). Besides, Sanders affirms that the *langue* characterized as social preceded Saussure's studies, "one view of language as a social institution, an idea which is present in the CGL, had been articulated in the eighteenth century by the philosopher Destutt de Tracy" (SANDERS, 2004, p. 32) and she adds that this concept was not totally explained in the saussurian studies, so she alleges that "the related concept of language as social interaction is not fully developed in Saussure, partly because of the incomplete nature of his work."

It is notorious that Saussure has presented a different approach to the linguistics studies pointing out that the object to be studied would be the *langue*, so that there is a focus on what is social. However, the individual part was not something that simply did not appear in his work, actually, it was present in his work. We can observe that the *langue* and the *parole* do not work apart from each other in Saussure (1959, p. 18), so "language is necessary if speaking is to be intelligible and produce all its effects; but speaking is necessary for the establishment of language, and historically its actuality always comes first", or as Normand points out "the *langue*, isolated from the *parole*, is only fiction... It is known that in the same time the generality of the *social fact*, early thought by Durkheim, equally irritated those ones, like G. Tarde, who were fascinated by the diversity, by the heterogeneous, or by the individual singularity"(NORMAND, 2009, p. 128). We can also see this discussion in Silva (2011):

"[...] not that *langue* and *parole* should be, in all moments, studied separately. [...] But the separation of elements mutually interdependent only happens abstractly, in other words, the *langue* separated from the *parole* only

subsists through a mental process, through the reflection of the linguist about the properties that the this object owns. (SILVA, 2011, p. 11)

Another fact we can notice in Labov's reading of Saussure is that, according to Coan and Freitag (2010, p. 175) "the sociolinguist does not see the *langue* as a propriety of the individual, but of the community (it is social)", though "Labov disagrees of Saussure, Chomsky and others who insist in the homogeneity necessary to the linguistic object, that ignore the heterogeneity and that consider the *parole* as chaotic and demotivated" (FIGUEROA *apud* COAN; FREITAG, 2010, p. 175). Nevertheless, Normand adds that "abnegating the demarcation *langue/parole* and that one which is allied to them, *langue/langage*, would be abnegate the principal of pertinence that has permitted the beginning of the modern linguistics". (NORMAND, 2009, p. 131)

At this point we can see a great difference between the works of Saussure and Labov, as Coan and Freitag observe:

All the sociolinguists agree that productions and interpretations of a speaker are not the primarily place of a linguistics' investigation nor the final units of analyses, but the used components to construct models to our primary object of interest, the *speech community* (COAN; FREITAG, 2010, p. 175)

While Saussure "has distanced the 'subject', as many people insists on saying, or at least, the *individual*, which is marked by the traits of conscious [...] it was reserved, or abandoned, to the domain of *parole* (NORMAND, 2009, p. 133). This way, we can notice that there's a great difference on what is considered social by Saussure and Labov, so there is a very different approach between them.

Equally, we can notice that the social concept of Labov was also criticized:

The impact of Labov's work on the languages' studies was widely recognized. Although his concept of "social" has been criticized (rightly) by scholars affiliated with other theoretical perspectives – such as the discourse analyzes, the language sociology, the linguistic anthropology, the interactional sociolinguist etc." (BAGNO, 2008, p. 9)

Thinking now about the abstract/concrete, Labov has made an observation which shows a very different reading on what we find in the *Cours*. The author first talks about the saussurian paradox, as we saw before, and also Labov adds after this the following: "the study of this abstract 'language'" (LABOV, 1972, p. 186); this statement we can find in the saussurian's studies, as we could observe before, Saussure always stated that the *langue* is concrete.

Joseph (2004, p. 64) says that this concept of the object of linguistics being concrete is one of the complex aspects in Saussure, once the object is concrete when we have the junction of the signifier and the signified, when we have only one of them, these are simply an abstraction. Joseph always states:

The first thing to understand is that, for Saussure, 'real' and 'concrete' had a specific and somewhat idiosyncratic meaning. [...] he asked what can be

called 'real' in morphology, and answered, 'what speakers are conscious of to any degree whatever' [...] he does not mean that speakers are always directly aware of the concrete linguistic units they are using.

He also adds that,

Abstractions, on the other hand, are linguists' analytical inventions – and that includes the signifier and signified. [...] specifically warns his students to avoid dissociating the two elements of the sign, lest they produce abstractions, units that appear to exist but are not actually part of the language. (JOSEPH, 2004, p. 65)

This excerpts leave the idea that Saussure had in relation to the concrete and abstract, we could see that he defended the *langue* as concrete, and that abstract is only what represents the sign dissociated from its minor parts, the signified and the signifier.

We find in Normand (2009, p. 60) that this "obsession" by the word concrete was opposed by the scientific ideology of that time that had the necessity of abstraction, and so "from this [the usage of the word concrete] derive certain confusions of this speech that, in its definitions, adds the evidences of its time, statements of a totally different importance".

5. Conclusion

The Course in General Linguistics was great target of critics, such as the fact of being a posthumous work organized from the notebooks of Saussure's students and some of the saussurian manuscripts, we can observe that these and other critics to the CGL and to Saussure's ideas are innumerable, authors question the new saussurian concepts, and also what he has not explored abundantly in his work. We can clearly see this when Labov together with Weinreich and Herzog (2009, p. 57) talk about what they call "Saussure's error", referring to the saussurian concepts which were based on the synchronic studies.

However, despite all these critics we can also see that the concepts concrete/abstract and social/individual were constructed so that Saussure could clarify their characteristics in his Geneva's classes, furthermore, in one hand we have the Geneva linguist that institutes the *langue* as social and concrete and, finally, as object of linguistics. On the other hand, Labov does not leave the social aside, but he sees the social in a different way, he recognizes it in the speech communities, that way he could create what we recognize today as sociolinguistic.

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