

Book Review

Saussure, A Guide for the Perplexed

Bouissac, Paul. 2010. London: Continuum.

Reviewer: Arnaud Fournet.

1. Description

The paperback nice-looking book under review has 152 pages, divided in: an Introduction, four biographical chapters (p.7-71), three conceptual chapters dealing with Saussure's well-known dichotomies (langue, parole, synchrony, etc.) (p.72-114), a chapter dedicated to the *Cours de linguistique générale (CLG)* (p.115-125), and a conclusion that deals with Saussure's legacy (p.126-140). In addition the book provides Appendices with quotations of Saussure's works.

The Introduction first presents Saussure (p.1-2) and then describes the contents of the following chapters. To a large extent it amounts to a summary of the book itself, providing the themes developed in each chapter and Bouissac's personal touch, which is apparent from the very first page.

Chapter1 is written like a fiction, “in the form of a dramatized diary” (p.7), that narrates some of the lessons of the third course given by Saussure in 1910-11. This “creative rendering” (p.7) is a “reconstruction” (p.8) mostly drawn from the notes of Emile Constantin (2006), who attended the third course. A number of sentences bear quotation marks and the reader is invited to think they are from Saussure himself.

Chapter2 describes the childhood and adolescence of Saussure as the elder son of a rich Swiss family with French Calvinist aristocratic roots, and his increasing tropism for linguistic issues.

Chapter3 describes Saussure's years in Leipzig, Berlin and then Paris, the sudden outburst of fame triggered by the *Mémoire*, his gradual estrangement from mostly hostile German scholars and his warm-hearted integration in Paris on the contrary, where he had already acquired a name after publishing articles in the *BSL* earlier as a teenager.

Chapter4 describes Saussure's years in Geneva until his demise in 1913, and his interest for marginal phenomena like glossolalia, anagrams in addition to historical and general linguistics.

Chapter5 is about Saussure's approach of linguistics and languages, and the thorny notion of *langue*. Bouissac emphasizes “two characteristics that resisted any doubt [for Saussure]: a language was both a kind of *system* and a kind of [*social*] *institution*.” (p.77) and “the fact that [each] *langue* had to be conceptualized as a self-contained system of relations” (p.84). This chapter is doubtless the best and most accurate in the book.

Chapter6 is about Saussure's approach of the linguistic units or signs. To some extent Chapter6 tries to explain European structuralism with the tools and perspective of American structuralism, which is not the most fortunate way to do so.

Typos: Uralo-Altaïc (p.16), indo-européen[n]es (p.46), Ecole[s] (p.51), Seventh District [seventh district] (p.53), Moeller [=Möller] (p.65), appointed at the University of Geneva in 1991 [=1891] (p.125), anagram[me]s (p.148), racines[s] (p.149).

2. Critical assessment

On the whole Bouissac (2010) can be described as a personal essay with an extensive bibliographical and historiographical perspective. It delves into Saussure's life and legacy. On the contrary the book does not investigate the intellectual roots of Saussure. For example the distinction between *Signifié* et *Signifiant* is quite obviously inherited from medieval modist theories as noted by Jakobson, and the distinction between *langue* and *parole* is parallel to Aristotle's *energeia* and *energon*. These considerations (remotely hinted at p.92) may have deserved a specific chapter in the book.

For a book with such a huge bibliographical perspective a disturbing and noticeable feature is the rather sloppy and erratic way sources are dealt with. For example the *CLG* is listed in the References (Bouissac 2010:148) as if it were written by Tullio de Mauro instead of Saussure. References are not clearly or explicitly given most of time. Bouissac (2010:36) states that some “chapters are based on a selective compilation of published materials”, but it would appear that many sections of the book are directly inspired or translated from existing sources, to a much larger extent than the book acknowledges. Another oddity in Chapter1 is the sentences given between quotation marks as if they were words actually spoken or written by Saussure. None of them has references and in addition some of them and the comments made on them conflict with Saussure's actual thinking and writings. Not infrequently they have cognitivist or generativist undertones that are completely alien to Saussure. It is unclear to me if these cognitivist or generativist features are meant to make Saussure easier to figure out or if they actually make him more perplexing. For example Bouissac talks about “the nature of the *langue*, the kind of abstract system that subtends [the infinite] diversity [of languages]” (2010:15), “*langue* the system that makes possible all languages, that is, what all languages have in common at the most abstract level of analysis” (2010:12), or states that “*langue* is related to a broader mental faculty, whose function is to deal with all signs” (2010:18). This makes *langue* look like it can be equated with some kind of UG or LAD concept. Another sentence, attributed to Saussure, is: “la *langue* is necessarily comparable to a line whose elements can be cut out into pieces like a ribbon” (2010:26), which sounds more Bloomfieldian than Saussurean. Not infrequently these sentences between quotation marks contradict other parts of the book, contained in the same chapter or later on: for example “*langue* (the system of the particular language we happen to speak)” (2010:13), which is closer to Saussure's actual teachings.

Chapter1 seems to be partly drawn from Constantin (2006). Telltale signs betray the language of the original text, as shown by <Uralo-Altaïc> (Bouissac 2010:16) with French tréma as in <ouralo-altaïques> (Constantin 2006:111). Chapter2 (Bouissac 2010:37) acknowledges that “some of the information provided in this chapter is based” on “Tullio de Mauro (1967)”. It would appear that all Chapters2, 3, 4 are extensively based on that source, with some additions from Mejía Quijano (2008), who is acknowledged to “ha[ve] brought to light some relevant information” for Chapter3, but some parts of Chapter4, in particular Bouissac (2010:53, 54, 68), are also based on that latter source. Synoptic correspondences between Bouissac (2010:36-71) and *CLG* (1972:319-358) can nearly be made. Taine is mentioned in Bouissac (2010:65) following controversial themes developed by Aarsleff.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 are acknowledged to be based on a book published in French in 2003 and translated into English in 2006 (Bouissac 2010:72-73), but the name of the book, i.e. *Writing in general linguistics*, is not given. Chapter 8 (Bouissac 2010:121) cites Engler (2004: 47-58).

Chapter 9 deals with themes developed by Bouquet and Milner, who are neither cited in the text nor listed in the references. §3. “A Saussurean revival or not?” in Bouissac (2010:134) sounds like Milner (1994) “Retour vers Saussure [Revisiting Saussure]”. The author mentioned in Bouissac (2010:139) is Harris (2001). Appendix I also mentions Harris (2000) and Appendix II is a collection of explicit quotations.

Most of the book therefore amounts to syntheses, digests or translations of existing sources joined together by Bouissac's own introductory words, comments and claims to which I will now turn.

Among the typical features and themes developed by Bouissac, which tend to recur as leitmotifs from chapter to chapter, a first tendency is to describe Saussure with unfavorable words. That feature pervades the Introduction: “did not publish a treatise”, “ambiguities” (p.1), “unfinished manuscripts”, “inconclusive” (p.2), “scribbled notes” (p.3), “not to have been able” (p.4), “uncertain”, “perplexity”, “unfinished agenda” (p.5). A typical example in Chapter 1 is: “the whole picture remains fuzzy and elusive”. Following chapters are more favorable although not free from smear words: Möller is said to “have corrected some flaws [sic] in his essay [=Saussure's *Mémoire*]” (p.47) when the truth is more that Möller built on Saussure's theory to invent an explicit laryngealist theory, Saussure's family is described as a “caste” (p.53, p.63), “his examples were mostly trivial, scant, and *ad hoc*” (p.83), etc.

Another theme developed by Bouissac is that the *CLG* itself would be a “contrivance” (p.115), a “forgery” (p.118), a “collage of bits and pieces from various sources” (p.121), a “mortuary mask” (p.140), “constructed, if not fabricated, by its [self appointed] editors (p.132). Bouissac (2010:145) describes the *CLG* as being “their [sic] book” as if the *CLG* were written by Bally and Sechehaye (At the same time the *CLG* is listed in the References as being from Tullio de Mauro...). According to Bouissac's theory the *CLG* would be a document that distorts and fails to represent Saussure's original thinking and the only solution is therefore to “go right to the very source” (p.3), i.e. the manuscripts, letters and notebooks that have been published later on (or remain unpublished).

Another claim made by Bouissac (2010:145) is that “Meillet (...) stated without ambiguity that he did not recognize the substance of Saussure's linguistic ideas and teaching” in the *CLG*. As shown by Meillet's own review of the *CLG* published in 1916, the claims made by Bouissac that (1) Saussure never managed to deliver a clear theory, (2) the *CLG* misrepresents Saussure's thinking and that (3) Meillet supports these two claims are false: “La conscience et le talent des rédacteurs ne laissent pas de doute sur la fidélité avec laquelle a été rendue en général la pensée du maître. [...] La pensée de F. de Saussure s'était fixée très tôt, on le sait. [...] Je les retrouve telles qu'il était souvent possible de les deviner.” [Because of the editors' seriousness and talent there is no possible doubt that Saussure's thinking is faithfully rendered in general. [...] Saussure's thinking got established very early, as is well-known. [...] I retrieve them [=his theories] just as it was often possible to infer them.” One short paragraph in Meillet (1916:33), from a famous and faithful disciple of Saussure, refutes Bouissac's theories. Besides it can be noted that the book cover has it that the *CLG* is a “book that was derived from his [=Saussure's] teachings”, which actually states the opposite of Bouissac's theory as developed inside the book.

If we were to follow Bouissac, Saussure as reflected in the *CLG* is not Saussure, and the basic and continuous unity of Saussure's thinking from the *Mémoire* to the *CLG* is to be torn apart into

several independent entities (p.141-2). Bouissac's presentation tries to split Saussure in two: on the one hand a Neogrammarian Saussure, who achieved fame with the *Mémoire*, and on the second hand a helpless disabled Saussure who has about nothing to do with the *CLG*, as if there were no general linguistics involved in Saussure's comparative teachings.

An implicit corollary of Bouissac's theories is that Saussure, being supposedly unable to deliver a consistent theory, hardly had any disciple: Bally and Sechehaye are quite oddly described as being Saussure's "colleagues" (p.1). It would also appear that "Saussure is considered [sic] to be the fountainhead of the semiology and structuralist movements" (p.1) for some unclear reasons, which Bouissac (2010:139) assimilates to "unconditional worshipping" of a "cult figure" or "ethnic hero" [sic], as if (European) Structuralism were not a direct creation and continuation of Saussure by Saussure's own disciples. An infortunate consequence of Bouissac's approach is that the book hardly deals with the history of (European) Structuralism itself and the diverse schools directly inspired by Saussure's teachings. Martinet and Benveniste, among others, are not listed in the Index nor cited in the text. Bouissac (2010:51-54) says little about Saussure's years in Paris where he taught to numerous students, some of them were about to become towering figures of French linguistics, met Baudouin de Courtenay at the EPHE, etc. The book is also conspicuous for hardly mentioning the Geneva's school of linguists nor the Congresses for Linguists which are directly inspired by Saussure, or the *Congrès des Orientalistes* that Saussure organized in Geneva in 1894. On the whole it would seem that there is no and never was any living or academic legacy of Saussure, based on its direct teachings, and that Saussure can nearly be reduced to a number of (un)published notebooks and manuscripts: what AppendixII calls the "quotable Saussure".

Another oft-repeated claim made by Bouissac is that Saussure invented a kind of meta-French for the *CLG* which would be at odds with everyday French. On the contrary the *Journal de Genève* (1916/06/26:1) states for example that [the reading of the *CLG* is possible for any attentive and educated person] and (1923/02/23:2) that the *CLG* is [admirably clear]. Quite amazingly Bouissac (2010:11) states that "*langue* and *langage* are broadly synonymous in French", Bouissac (2010:74) repeats that "another term, *langue*, [is] synonymous with *langage*". These two words are doubtless not synonymous and they can about never be used one for the other in modern French. The claim made by Bouissac (2010:74) that the French word *langage* "can refer to any of the languages that exists or have existed in the world" is false. This is precisely the core meaning of *langue* that *langage* never has. The supposed "ambiguity" of Saussure does not exist in French and is a lexical artefact of English, which has only one word for both. Cf. Fournet (2010).

3. *General conclusion*

On the whole the book is not free from inaccuracies, contradictions, biases and omissions of more or less severe magnitude. In spite of some laudative sentences, a distinctive and pervading dislike of Saussure makes the reading unpleasant for anybody who is well-versed in the life and legacy of Saussure. The book is expected to be a kind of reference book but to some extent it amounts to a soft-worded pamphlet designed to show that "Saussure was not the Albert Einstein of linguistics", which is the personal motto of Bouissac (2010:140) that provides the thread underlying the actual and missing contents and the overall negative tone of the book.

In my opinion this work cannot contribute to a better understanding and objective assessment of Saussure and of Saussurean theories and schools. To put it simple Saussure's thinking and legacy are misrepresented and mutilated.

References (in alphabetical order)

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