Saussurean anti-nomenclaturism in grammatical analysis:  
A comparative theoretical perspective

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1. Introduction

Few prepositions command as much agreement among students of language as that of marking the beginning of contemporary linguistics with the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916 [1990]). Linguists agree that the Geneva scholar formulated distinctions and introduced topics that have since become essential to the field (Robins 1964 [1989]: 34-35). These ideas include the familiar contrasts of synchrony versus diachrony, speech versus language, and syntagmatic versus associative relations.

But these ideas were not at the center of Saussure's intellectual convictions. Rather, as perceptively noted by Roy Harris (1988: 7-19, 47-61), Saussure's central insight was that a language is not a nomenclature. A language does not simply provide phonological labels for an independently existing set of concepts, but articulates its own conceptual classification as it parses the phonological and semantic continua in its own individual way (Saussure 1916: 97, translated by Roy Harris 1972 [1986]: 65). Accordingly, no aspect of language can be analyzed starting from antecedently given, universal categories. This first principle of Saussurean thought, with its deep implications for the current study of universal grammar, has eluded most contemporary scholars; in the view of one of Saussure's most perceptive commentators, it even eluded the editors of the *Cours* themselves (de Mauro 1967: xiv, 427).

Standing apart from the general inability of contemporary linguists to appreciate the importance of Saussure's point are not only Saussure scholars
like de Mauro and Harris, but also theoretical linguists who practice a form of analysis that Nichols (1984) has classified as *radical functionalism*. A prime exemplar in the U.S. is the work of William Diver (1969, 1979, 1984, 1995) and of his followers of the Columbia School of linguistics (Garcia 1975, Contini-Morava 1989, Huffman 1997, Reid 1991). Diver's followers, perhaps more self-consciously than any other group of linguists, have taken Saussure's anti-nomenclaturism seriously and developed it thoroughly in the investigation of grammatical phenomena. This paper explains and documents Saussure's anti-nomenclaturism, lays out in detail the anti-nomenclaturist nature of Columbia School work, documents its Saussurean roots, and contrasts it with the approaches of scholars that Newmeyer (1998) has grouped under the two labels *generativist* and *functionalist*.

2. Two central ideas of Saussure and the Columbia School

Two theoretical principles distinguish the analytical position of Diver and his followers from that of other grammarians. One is a radical Saussurean assertion; the second a revolutionary Saussurean denial. The assertion is that success in linguistics depends on keeping a sharp distinction between the conceptual content of communications and that of the linguistic inputs that help shape these communications. For Diver, the categories of language that are the proper object of discovery for linguistics are those that can describe the inputs, not those that describe the communications.

The denial is directed against the claim that the communications should be viewed as sentences expressing logical propositions structured in terms of the categories of traditional grammar. This denial by the Columbia School is in two parts. The first denies that the categories of the tradition can be regarded as observational categories. The second denies that these alleged observational categories can then be promoted to the status of explanatory constructs in the underlying grammatical system.

3. The role of the traditional categories

The term "category" is taken here in the broad sense encompassing not only lexical categories or parts of speech, but also sentential categories or syntactic functions. The main point is that the disagreement between the Columbia School and other theories over such categories as subject, object, complement,
declaratives and interrogatives, datives and accusatives, agent, patient, mass noun, noun-verb agreement or reflexive pronoun, to name only a few, is not primarily a disagreement about units of analysis but rather about units of observation.

3.1 Traditional categories used to articulate the data

In most branches of contemporary linguistics, these familiar categories are not primarily analytical units to be justified, nor hypotheses to be tested, nor constructs posited especially for the purpose of explaining the observations. Rather, these categories are used to articulate the observations; they constitute the primitive vocabulary in terms of which the phenomenon of language is described.

To document a foundational point of this sort, one must appeal to works written at turning points in the history of linguistics, because in later works these basic claims turn into unstated assumptions that are obscured from scrutiny. One such turning point is the founding document of generative grammar, *Syntactic Structures* (1957), where Noam Chomsky considers the four sentences in (1):

(1) a. John ate an apple  
    b. Did John eat an apple  
    c. What did John eat  
    d. Who ate an apple

Chomsky points out the many interesting differences that can be readily observed between these sentences. He suggests that if we attempted to subdivide them in terms of intonation, as in (2), sentence b (with a rising intonation) would be opposed to a, c, and d (falling intonation).

(2) a. John ate an apple  
    c. What did John eat  
    d. Who ate an apple  
    b. Did John eat an apple
In terms of word order, Chomsky notes in (3) that \(a\) and \(d\) (with what he calls a normal NP VP order) would be opposed to \(b\) and \(c\), which show inversion of the auxiliary.

(3)  

a. John ate an apple  
d. Who ate an apple  

b. Did John eat an apple  
c. What did John eat  

But Chomsky insists that these observations are not the relevant ones. The correct observation is that, as in (4), there are here two types of sentences—declaratives and interogatives—and that the interogatives are subdivided into two types.

(4)  

a. John ate an apple (declarative)  
b. Did John eat an apple (yes-no)  
c. What did John eat (wh-interrogative)  
d. Who ate an apple (wh-interrogative)

Chomsky leaves no doubt that the traditional categories of declarative, interrogative, etc. are part of the observations and constitute the beginning of grammatical analysis. In his familiar ascription of the Western tradition to the universal mind, Chomsky maintained that this classification is “intuitively obvious” and part of the data for which the grammarian is responsible.

Any grammar of English will classify the sentences in the manner indicated . . . and any speaker of English will understand the sentences according to this pattern. Certainly a linguistic theory that fails to provide grounds for this classification must be judged inadequate. (Chomsky 1957: 91)

Chomsky, then, admits that many types of observations are possible. But the only relevant ones are those that can be couched in terms of the categories sanctioned by the grammatical tradition.
The assumption that the traditional categories constitute the data of linguistics is not unique to Chomsky, nor to generative grammarians or even to formalist schools as a whole. Functionalists make the same assumption.

Because of the clarity of its theoretical statements, and the wide recognition it has achieved, the work of Johanna Nichols is particularly useful as an illustration of the point that the grammatical categories are part of the data for functionalists (the point is less easy to discern, because it is left implicit, in the analysis of functionalism by Newmeyer 1998: 13ff). Nichols' work focuses on non-Indo-European languages and stresses the strong empirical grounding of her investigations. The following description of her research is from the preface to one of her edited volumes.

These advances are not simply the consequence of an exotic data base. They are the natural product of a perspective on linguistic theory growing out of descriptive work: an inductive, comparative, phenomenon-oriented approach . . . [The] scientific objective is to describe, not analytic and theoretical constructs, but linguistic phenomena themselves. (Nichols & Woodbury 1984: 1-2; my emphasis, RO.)

And what are the linguistic phenomena themselves? The answer is that the linguistic phenomena are grammatical relations:

[The works in this volume contribute to] an improved understanding of grammatical relations and their cross-linguistic coding. (Nichols & Woodbury 1984: 1; my emphasis, RO)

Note that what varies cross-linguistically is the coding of grammatical relations. But the grammatical relations themselves, even in exotic languages, are part of the observations and are known to exist prior to analysis. And what are grammatical relations? The answer is in this revealing passage:

Grammatical relations refers to the syntactic functions marked in some languages by cases, in some by cross-referencing verbal affixes, and in some by word order . . . Linguists of most theoretical persuasions would probably agree that all languages have grammatical relations and that the notion 'grammatical relation' is a cross-linguistically homogenous one: particular grammatical relations - subject, object, etc. - exhibit considerable cross-linguistic varia-
tion, for example in pragmatic content, but the classificatory notion of grammatical relations as a kind of clause skeleton and a generic term for subject, object, etc. is universal and theory independent. (Nichols & Woodbury 1984: 9; my emphasis, RO)

The theoretical positions of both formalists and functionalists are thus remarkably convergent on the question of observational units. For both groups, the grammatical relations and categories of the tradition give form to the raw material of linguistics and shape the basic observational universals that confront all analysts, regardless of theoretical persuasion.

3.2 The structure of language found in the data

The same point can also be made by spelling out the theoretical position that lies behind the familiar phrase the structure of language. In most branches of linguistics, the structure of language is not simply what one uncovers through analysis. It is that too, of course. But even prior to analysis there is already a structure, articulated in terms of traditional notions, available for observation. The purpose of linguistic analysis is to study this observable structure and to expand it and formalize it. Nichols makes the point, in a passage comparing formal and functional grammar.

In formal grammar, the language phenomenon is the means of description, the material on which arguments for the construction of the model are based . . . Functional grammar broadens its purview. It too analyzes grammatical structure. But it also analyzes: the communicative situation, the purpose of the speech event, the participants, and the discourse context. (Nichols 1984: 97; my emphasis, RO)

Irrespective of the type of theory, then, the goal of linguistics is to analyze a grammatical structure that is already known to be articulated in traditional terms. This becomes even clearer when, in the same paper, Nichols proceeds to classify functional linguists as conservative, moderate, or extreme. The classification is based on the different positions they take precisely with regard to this observable structure. Conservative functionalists are described as follows:

Conservative functionalism acknowledges the inadequacy of strict formalism without proposing a new analysis of structure. For
example, Kuno, who proposes that rules have [functional] restrictions but offers no new analysis. (Nichols 1984: 102; my emphasis, RO)

A moderate functionalist is now described:

[Moderate functionalism] points out the inadequacy of a formalist or structuralist analysis but goes on to propose a functional analysis of structure and hence to replace or change inherited formal or structural accounts of structure. (Nichols 1984: 103; my emphasis, RO)

Most functionalists fall into the class of moderates who propose analyses that differ from those of the formalists. But notice that they do not differ in the object of observation, which for both conservatives and moderates is the structure of language that, before analysis, is known to be characterizable in traditional terms. Once Nichols has covered conservative and moderate functionalists, there remain only a few positions labeled as reductionist and extreme.

[Extreme functionalism] denies, in one way or another, the reality of structure qua structure. It may claim that rules are based entirely on function and hence there are no purely syntactic constraints; that structure is only coded function, or the like. This kind of reductionism is common enough in oral statements but rare in print. (Nichols 1984: 103; my emphasis, RO)

For Nichols, then, structure is what one finds in the phenomena. For her, as for Chomsky, an account of structure must be offered if one is to stay within the range of approved theoretical positions. And for Nichols, as for Chomsky, this antecedently given structure is articulated in terms of the categories and relations of the tradition. (For more discussion on the a priori nature of linguistic data among functionalists and formalists, see Huffman 1997: 257ff.)

Let us now pause to guard against three misunderstandings. First, no criticism is made here of the assumption that languages must have a structure. The assumption that the object of study is somehow orderly and systematic, which linguists share with all scientists, may very well be a safe one to make. The criticism is of the assumption that a substantial part of this structure is amenable to observation by the linguist upon first encountering the language,
and that this observable structure is universal and articulated in terms of the traditional categories. The quarrel is not with the analytical attempt to find structure, guided by the assumption that there is a structure to be found. The quarrel is with the assumption that a substantial portion of the structure is readily visible, and organized in terms of the constructs of the tradition.

Second, no objection is raised here against universality per se. The result of research demonstrating through analysis that languages share large numbers of common features may very well be quite valid. The objection is to assuming that universal features are there to begin with, and that they are the ones offered up by the Western grammatical tradition. The quarrel is not with findings of universality, but with assuming the universals to be present to start with.

Third, I have shown that many linguists regard the categories of structure as part of the observations because it is a point that is frequently overlooked. However, I am not suggesting that all categories and all structure are regarded by these linguists as amenable to observation. Among generativists and functionalists, a lot of structure obviously becomes known only as a result of analyses driven by testable hypotheses. These analyses use the assumed structure but add to it, often positing constructs that were not originally used for the observations and, in many cases, that were not part of the grammatical tradition. The quarrel is not with the portion of the postulated structure that is the result of analysis, but rather with the substantial portion that gets into the analysis in the form of untestable observation.

3.3 The traditional categories promoted to the analysis

Let us elaborate on this second point. The traditional categories have a dual role. The universal categories of subject, object, agent, case, etc. are first used to describe the phenomena, and are then promoted from units of observation to units of analysis. This promotion is smooth and unremarkable. If you pour Kool Aid into water, it will turn red; if you then freeze it, the ice cubes will naturally also be red. Once introduced as the units that shape the observations, the traditional constructs are simply carried over into whatever analyses derive from those observations. For Chomsky in Syntactic Structures, the interrogative sentence is a unit of the phenomena, but question-formation is a transformation, a category of the analysis. In present-day syntactic theory, reflexive and anaphoric pronouns are in the observations, but the binding principles that restrict anaphoric and reflexive reference are in the analysis
Yet we have no reason to believe that English has a dedicated question-forming mechanism or a reflexive. For example, Reid (1991) demonstrates that questions are produced in English through the same linguistic mechanism that is used for many other purposes, and Stern (2001) shows that English -self forms are better understood if they are not treated as reflexive pronouns.

The examples could be multiplied at will. As analyses proceed, the traditional units that were first assumed in an assertive fashion to be part of the observations are never left behind, but continue as integral parts of the analyses. The red Kool Aid of the traditional observations is frozen hard in linguistic analysis, but we learn nothing about ice by finding it to be red, because the redness had already been introduced long before it was ice. It is as part of linguistic analyses that the traditional categories must ultimately be evaluated. Yet these analytical units that should derive their legitimacy from rigorous examination in fact escape scrutiny by getting into the analysis, at the earlier stage, as unexamined units of observation.

3.4 Columbia School’s dissenting position on categories and structure as data

The position taken by Columbia School linguists with regard to these matters is quite different from that of functionalists and formalists. In his study entitled “Latin precursors of the Romance reflexive”, Diver (1987) starts out by stressing that the paper is not at all about the Reflexive.

It should be made clear from the beginning that: The object of study is the morphological unit se, and not the “Reflexive pronoun.”
(Diver 1987: 115).

Upon examination, the notion of a Reflexive pronoun turns out to be an obstacle to understanding the distribution of the form se, rather than a useful initial observation on which to build the analysis. A similar point is made in an analysis of Italian by Joseph Davis.

A grammarian is far too likely to ask, “What is the subject pronoun in Italian?” rather than to ask, “What is egli? What is lui? And what is the difference between them? (Davis 1992: 1)

Here too, the notion of subject, far from being a good place to start, proves a hindrance to understanding the distribution of egli and lui. Similarly, Reid
(1991) demonstrates that the notion of subject-verb agreement impedes rather than facilitates an understanding of English words with and without suffix -s and, in a landmark study, García (1975) demonstrates that the distribution of Spanish le, lo, and la cannot be understood as long as one thinks of them as datives and accusatives acting as direct and indirect objects.

Examples of this sort could be multiplied from books and papers by Columbia School linguists (for overviews, general discussion, and bibliographical annotations on Columbia School work, see Contini-Morava 1995 and Reid 1991: 42-43n). Experience has shown that the universal categories of the grammatical tradition, far from representing theory-independent data that the linguist has to explain, constitute artificially created obstacles that make an explanation of the real data difficult, and often impossible.

This position of Columbia School scholars, derived from analytical experience, extends to the assumption that among the givens is something called the structure of language. Most Columbia School linguists, if they use the term at all, use it for the end result, and not the beginning, of linguistic analysis. In a discussion of the limitation of the sentence, García uses "the structure of language" as follows:

[Restricting] linguistic analysis to sentences in isolation, with total disregard of the larger context in which they occur (both linguistic and extralinguistic), can only lead to failure in the search for the structure of language. (García 1979:24; my emphasis, RO)

The contrast between the emphasized phrase here and the ones by Nichols above make the point eloquently. Nichols wants to analyze the existing structure of language; García wants to search for it. For Diver and his followers, all of the structure of language is uncovered as a result of proposing explanatory hypotheses. A linguistic analysis, whose aim is to explain the observations, tries to bring to light a grammatical structure by proposing hypotheses as to what this structure must be like. As such, the structure is always tentative and subject to disconfirmation. But the observations themselves do not contain grammatical structure. It is thus natural that among the examples of extreme functionalism, Nichols (1984) cite a Columbia School paper (García 1979) as a prime exemplar.

In Columbia School work, then, one finds a clearly dissenting position with regard to the nature of the phenomena. Diver and his students deny the relevance for articulating the observations of the categories that Chomsky finds
"intuitively obvious," of the cross-linguistic grammatical relations that Nichols considers universal and theory-independent, and of the structure of language that she regards as the responsibility of all but the most extreme functionalists to describe.

3.5 Saussure's position on categories and structure as ways of articulating the data

Does this dissenting view have historical antecedents? We know, from published testimony by Diver, of the relevance of Saussure in his thinking about language. In a discussion of the relative importance of substance (the notional content of meanings) and value (the oppositional relations between meanings), Diver states that there is:

... a direct line of scholarly descent from Saussure to the Prague School and from there by way of André Martinet, who was the first to reintroduce substance in correlation with value, to the work of Martinet's successors at Columbia University. (Diver 1974: 11)

But beyond the known personal connections, it seems clear that the Columbia dissent with regard to the syntactic tradition can be traced without difficulty to the part of Saussure's thought that the editors selected for publication in the Cours.

Saussure's rejection of the tradition was based on his unique understanding of the problem of establishing synchronic units. In fields of study such as zoology and astronomy, Saussure said, the units are easily observed. But the units of language present us with a paradox. They must exist, otherwise languages would not work. Yet, unlike animals and planets, the units of language cannot be observed (Saussure 1916: 149, translated by Roy Harris 1972 [1986]: 105). It is in this context that Saussure emphatically rejects the position that would later be adopted by Chomsky and Nichols that some of the units of language are amenable to observation.

A language thus has this curious and striking feature. It has no immediately perceptible entities. And yet one cannot doubt that they exist, or that the interplay of these units is what constitutes linguistic structure. (Saussure 1916: II, 3,149; Harris 1972 [1986]:105; my emphasis, RO)
As the discussion moves to realities and values, the point is made again:

To avoid being misled, it is first of all important to realize that *concrete linguistic entities do not just present themselves for inspection of their own accord. It is in seeking them out that one makes contact with linguistic reality.* (Saussure 1916: II, 3,153; Harris 1972 [1986]: 108; my emphasis, RO)

Independently of any critique of the syntactic tradition, Saussure denies the existence of any specific categories in a language prior to analysis. Speech offers the linguist no cross-linguistic units tangible enough to be inspected, much less recognized as intuitively obvious. For Saussure, to be sure, the categories of language do exist. But they all have to be discovered, and only after discovering them are we in touch with linguistic reality. This resonates with the formulation by García and the Columbia School but clashes with the one by Nichols. No aspect of the structure of a language can be observed; all of it must be searched for.

In considering what these linguistic units might or might not be, Saussure specifically picks for discussion the categories of the tradition. First, he sets aside the *word* as a not very likely candidate. He then focuses naturally on the tradition's central organizing construct, the *sentence*. Saussure explicitly discards the sentence as a unit of language, relegating it at best to speech. For Saussure, sentences vary idiosyncratically and without patterning, and whatever systematicity they show is simply due to their constituent words; as sentences, they show no orderly structural resemblance that would qualify them as units.

A widely held view claims that the only concrete linguistic units are sentences. We speak in sentences, it is said: analyzing sentences into words is a secondary operation. But first of all it must be asked to what extent sentences belong to the language itself. If the sentence as such belongs to speech, it can hardly be counted as a linguistic unit. . . . If we think of all the sentences which could be uttered, *what strikes us most forcibly is the lack of resemblance between them*. We might at first be tempted to compare the immense diversity of sentences to the analogous diversity of individuals included in a zoological species. But that is an illusion. In animals of the same species the common characteristics are much more important than the individual differences. *With sentences, on*
the contrary, it is diversity which is predominant. As soon as one looks for something to link them together in spite of this diversity, one finds that one has unintentionally come back to the word and its grammatical features, with all the attendant difficulties already familiar. (Saussure 1916: II, 2, 148-149; Harris, 1972 [1986]: 107-104)

Having rejected the sentence, Saussure proceeds to question all the related categories. He brings up the ever more current part-of-speech classification, and wonders whether it might belong to the language system.

On what is the classification into nouns, adjectives, etc. based? Is it on some purely logical principle of an extra-linguistic nature, applied to grammar from outside like lines of longitude and latitude on the earth’s globe? Or does it correspond to something which belongs within, and is determined by the language system? (Saussure 1916: II, 3, 152; Harris, 1972 [1986]: 107-108)

The issue has been raised in the form of a question, and Saussure demurs before answering. He was perhaps a more cautious scholar than Diver. Or maybe the tentative note was introduced by the editors, perhaps as a way to deal with a new idea they didn’t entirely understand. They have Saussure say that the second answer, that parts of speech belong within the system, is likely to be correct, only to say immediately afterwards that the first answer, that they are imposed from outside, has a lot to recommend it too. In any case, a position is eventually taken.

The conclusion is that our ‘parts of speech’ classification must be defective or incomplete; its division of words into nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. does not correspond to any undeniable linguistic reality. (Saussure 1916: II, 3, 153; Harris 1972 [1986]: 108; my emphasis, RO)

In summary, the Cours first raises the question of the nature of the phenomena of synchronic linguistics and finds that no units can be observed. It then brings up the issue of the underlying system, and it finds there neither sentences nor parts of speech.
What the *Cours* does find in the linguistic system, as we know, is a large storehouse full of syntagmas (Saussure 1916: II, 6, 179; Harris, 1972 [1986]: 128). Examples of syntagmas are in (5):

(5)   
  *re-lire*  
  ‘re-read’  
  *contre tous*  
  ‘against all’  
  *la vie humaine*  
  ‘human life’  
  *Dieu est bon.*  
  ‘God is good’  
  *S’il fait beau temps, nous sortirons.*  
  ‘If the weather is good, we’ll go out’

Saussure, of course, was aware that some syntagmas bear a superficial resemblance to sentences, and tackles the question head on:

An objection may be raised at this point. The most typical kind of syntagma is the sentence. But the sentence belongs to speech, not to the language. So does it not follow that the syntagma is a phenomenon of speech too? Not in our view. The characteristic of speech is freedom of combination; so the first question to ask is whether all syntagmas are equally free . . . . (Saussure 1916: II, 5, 172; Harris 1972 [1986]: 122)

For Saussure, then, the linguistic system has syntagmas, but not sentences (Saussure 1916: II, 2, 148 & 149; Harris 1972 [1986]: 104). The syntagmas of Saussure are simply the groups that show no variability, the prefabricated chunks that Dwight Bolinger was so fond of pointing out (Bolinger 1975: 107-111; Saussure 1916: II, 6, 174; Harris 1972 [1986]: 124).

The reason that these chunks of the language system are not sentences is that they are not structured in terms of the traditional sentential categories. For Saussure, a sentence is no different from a phrase, a word, an inflection, or a phoneme. (Saussure 1916: II, 5, 172; Harris 1972 [1986]: 122). All units of language are structured through the associative oppositions in which they enter, including all syntagmas, which for Saussure have no special status (Saussure 1916: II, 6, 179; Harris 1972 [1986]: 129). Moreover, for Saussure there is no reason to believe that there is any real distinction between what the
tradition calls syntax, on the one hand, and lexicon and morphology on the other. They are all the same for Saussure because they all operate under the same principles of either associative or syntagmatic opposition (Saussure 1916: II, 5, 184; Harris 1972 [1986]: 132 and Saussure 1916: II, 7, 186; Harris 1972 [1986]: 133).

The *Cours* suggests that Saussure was keen on his denial of the tradition. The first page of the book contains his dismissal of the grammar of the Greeks and the French as unscientific and, more important, as related to the study of speech and of language itself. The topic is taken up again in the chapter on abstract entities, where Saussure notes that above and beyond the words and the other syntagmas of direct experience, the tradition perceives a *sentential structure*. In rejecting this structure, Saussure is denying syntax at its most basic level, and in the most general terms possible. To illustrate his position, he points to languages like English where syntacticians, then and now, are prone to perceive the formless presence of deleted relative pronouns.

It would be a mistake to believe in the existence of *an incorporeal syntax* apart from these material units distributed in space. In English, the *man I have seen* illustrates a syntactic feature apparently represented by zero, whereas French marks it by *que*, as in *l'homme que j'ai vu*. But it is just this comparison with French syntax which produces the illusion that nothing can express something. In reality, the material units in the English example, aligned in a certain manner, create this value themselves. . . . (Saussure 1916: II, 7, 191; Harris, 1972 [1986]: 137)

The principle that there is no incorporeal syntax is particularly important to bear in mind in cases such as these relative clauses.

[In these cases] the temptation is particularly strong to imagine *immaterial abstractions hovering above the actual words* in the sentence. (Saussure 1916: II, 7, 192; Harris 1972 [1986]: 138; my emphasis, RO)

In conclusion, Saussure insisted that there are no units of structure amenable to direct observation, and maintained that the parts of speech and sentences in terms of which the tradition purports to be able to observe linguistic phenomena were a nomeclaturist illusion.
4. Linguistic meaning as data

Saussure and the Columbia School differ from other approaches on a second issue, namely their attitude toward linguistic meaning. This second area of disagreement shows striking parallels with the first. For most theoreticians, linguistic meaning, like grammatical structure, is part of the data for which an analysis has to be provided. But for Saussure and Diver, linguistic meaning cannot be observed, but rather must be searched for. In most disciplines, linguistic meaning is the beginning of analysis; for Saussure and Diver, it is the end result.

That linguistic meaning is a given in most theories does not require a great deal of demonstration. For most formal and functional theoreticians, propositional meaning is literally present in a sentence. Phrases and sentences can be lifted from their environment and laid out for inspection on the laboratory bench. Under such conditions, the isolated sentential specimens can be seen to have an inherent linguistic property, called literal meaning. Figuring out exactly how to model and represent this literal, propositional meaning is of course a serious analytical problem. But as to its systemic status, its existence, and its availability for inspection under conditions of isolation there is no doubt.

That most scholars subscribe to this view can be seen in their willingness to establish through inspection that some sentences have one meaning while others have two or more, and that some pairs of sentences have similar meanings while others don't. The illustration will come again from the early period of generative grammar, and again for the reason given above that these foundational positions tend to be obscured in later works.

In Syntactic Structures Chomsky deals with facts that must be explained in addition to judgments of grammaticality, and with the levels of representation that must be posited to account for them.

There are many facts about language and linguistic behavior that require explanation beyond the fact that such and such a string . . . is or is not a sentence. It is reasonable to expect grammars to provide explanations for some of these facts. For example, for many English speakers the phoneme sequence /oneym/ can be understood ambiguously as "a name" or "an aim". (Chomsky 1957: 85; my emphasis, RO)
Chomsky's point is to justify a level of morphology where sequences like /enzyme/ have dual representation. But our purpose is to note that for Chomsky the sequence /enzyme/ is understood ambiguously:

[C]ases of dual representation are 'understood' in more than one way. (Chomsky 1957: 86).

In other words, the homonymy rests on the two observable linguistic meanings that are part of the data.

The converse of one string being understood in more than one way is two strings being understood in only one way. In discussing sentences like John played tennis and My friend likes music, Chomsky points out that "these sequences should somehow be 'understood' in a similar manner... [I]t is evident that in some sense they are similarly understood" (Chomsky 1957: 86). His point is that the similarity of meaning requires a level of phrase structure, much like the differences of meaning in /enzyme/ justified a level of morphology. But our point is that, for Chomsky, the exact number of meanings, and the identities, similarities, and differences between them can be observed; the linguistic meaning of sentences, like the linguistic meaning of phrases, both in clearly specifiable numbers, are for Chomsky part of the phenomena that the linguist has to account for.

The point emerges with greater clarity when Chomsky returns to homonymy, this time in order to justify levels of phrase structure and transformational structure for strings like They are flying planes and the shooting of the hunters (1957: 88). The homonymy can be seen clearly in the counterpart sentences that Chomsky offers for comparison in (6) and (7):

(6)  a. They are flying planes
     b. Those specks on the horizon are flying planes
     c. My friends are flying planes

(7)  a. the shooting of the hunters
     b. the growling of lions,
        i.e., lions growl = hunters shoot
     c. the raising of flowers,
        i.e., someone raises flowers = someone shoots hunters
Chomsky provides the counterparts $b$ and $c$ for each sentence to make the point that the sentences are homonymous in exactly the same way that /oneym/ is homonymous. Chomsky’s term stresses the parallel by calling these cases of “constructional homonymy” (actually, “constructional homonymity”, 1957: 87). The counterparts $b$ and $c$ serve to make another point, namely that the counterparts to the homonymous sentences are not homonymous. So *Those specks on the horizon are flying planes* and *My friends are flying planes* each has only one meaning; they do not show constructional homonymy.

All these sentences are thus linguistic objects. They are entities in the English language, inherently possessing linguistic meaning in discrete, quantifiable numbers. Under laboratory conditions, nothing about linguistic meaning is vague or inexact. As the linguist inspects them, some pairs of sentences can definitely be recognized as being similar, and some as dissimilar, some can be recognized as having one meaning, others as having two, etc.

4.1 *Columbia’s dissenting position on meaning as data*

The position taken by Diver and his students on these matters could not be more different. From the point of view of Columbia School linguistics, the isolated specimens do not communicate much of anything at all, and so the issue of the meaning of strings hardly merits discussion under conditions of isolation. The erroneous belief in the existence of literal meaning stems from the well-known fact that, in developing an intuition about the meaning of an isolated sentence, the linguist, or the informant, always factors in an implicit context. The lab bench, so to speak, is never clean; rather, it is strewn with contextual bits and pieces that become stuck to the specimens. The isolated sentence is not in fact being considered in isolation, but within an unacknowledged context that allows it to become associated with some sort of communication.

But the number of these communications is not determinate, any more than the number of dust particles that come off the beach is determinate. Thus it is not the case that some sentential specimens are inherently possessed of one communication, some two, some three, etc. In themselves, sentences possess no communications. Associated with contexts, they have an indeterminate number. When Columbia School scholars take the many communications associated with a string and look at them one at a time, they still find no linguistic meaning. A communication is a one-time event that is both elusively ephemeral and staggeringly complex. Far from being a systemic linguistic entity, a
communication is an intricately elaborate cognitive object in which the language system plays an important but by no means determining role. (For an early critique of generative grammar making precisely this point, see Uhlhaasbeck 1963, 1967).

Repeating the point with an example, the inspection in isolation of an item like the shooting of the hunters does not reveal two communications. It reveals none. Once placed in a context, however, a specific communication may be attained. In (8) we find one not included in Chomsky’s list:

(8) The shooting of the hunters out of the cannon that was fired by the other clowns was especially funny because, after flying through the air, the hunters fell on a water tank filled with ducks.

But the communication in (8) is not a linguistic object. The only linguistic entities are the hypothesized lexical signals shoot and hunter, and the hypothesized grammatical signals the, -ing, and -s. For each of these forms (which are only tentative hypotheses; this parsing may prove wrong under more careful analysis, yielding a different set of signals), the linguist will advance hypotheses as to the semantic input that each form provides into (8) and into all other communications to which each contributes. These individual inputs constitute the only linguistic meanings that exist.

The terminological distinction drawn by the Columbia School between meaning and message is thus quite appropriate. The word meaning is reserved, as in linguistics generally, as the term used for that which the theory sees as having systemic status; in other words, the term is reserved for that which is in the language. Since the content of each individual signal is in the language, it is referred to as a meaning. Since no other content is in the language, nothing else is called a meaning. In particular, since none of the myriad communications enabled by the shooting of the hunters is in the language, none is called a meaning. Referring to the content of these communications simply as messages thus accurately reflects their lack of linguistic status.

The work of the linguist, then, is to do research into that which is properly linguistic, namely meanings and their signals. Distinguishing sharply between meaning and message, and insisting on the message’s lack of linguistic status, has been the key to analytical success in the work of the Columbia School.
4.2 *Saussure's dissenting position on meaning as data*

The Columbia *meaning* that we have been discussing is different in many ways from the *signifié* of Saussure, but there are important similarities that should also be noted. For Diver and his followers, meaning is substantively specified, whereas Saussure's *signifié* is often presented as completely relational and without substance. Secondly, meaning in the Columbia School has been studied primarily in grammar, whereas Saussure's is discussed primarily in reference to lexis. And most important, the highly elaborate and thoroughly tested meaning of a typical Columbia analysis is considerably more credible than the superficial sketches of the *Cours*.

Still and all, there is a clear historical connection between Saussure's *signifié* and Diver's *meaning*. In laying down the admittedly general principles having to do with value, the identity of units, and the relative allocation of elements to speech and to the language system, Saussure appears as a precursor to Columbia. This is clear in Saussure's choice of terminology. For Columbia's meaning, Saussure usually has *signifié* or *valeur*; for Columbia's message, he has *signification*. Saussure raises the question of whether these two are the same and offers a clear answer.

When we speak of the value of a word, we generally think first of its property of standing for an idea, and this is in fact one side of linguistic value. But if this is true, how does *value* differ from *signification*? Might the two words be synonymous? I think not, although it is easy to confuse them, since the confusion results not so much from their similarity as from the subtlety of the distinction that they mark. (Saussure 1916: 158, translated by Wade Baskin 1959 [1966]: 114).

Saussure goes on to provide a number of examples that have since become familiar. The French and Sanskrit plurals have the same signification but different value, because the latter enters into opposition with the dual. Saussure then gives another well-known example:

Modern French *mouton* can have the same signification as English *sheep* but not the same value, and this for several reasons, particularly because in speaking of a piece of meat ready to be served on the table, English uses *mutton* and not *sheep*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* is due to the fact that *sheep* has
beside it a second term while the French word does not. (Saussure 1916: 160, translated by Wade Baskin 1959 [1966]: 115-116)

While Saussure’s purpose here is to establish a notion of value that is by no means identical to Diver’s meaning, the passages serve to demonstrate the parallel between the thinking of the two scholars. Saussure’s significations are in each communication for the nonce, as are Diver’s messages; signifiés are stable in the language, as are Diver’s meanings.

More important than the terminological distinction are the positions taken by Saussure showing his conviction that the semantic import of a unit in the message is not its meaning in the linguistic system. In a familiar passage, Saussure points out that the semantic substance of the communication is as variable as its phonic substance. Just as a word receives a slightly different pronunciation each time, so does it have each time a slightly different semantic import. Yet it is, in every case, one and the same word.

For example, we may hear in the course of a lecture several repetitions of the word Messieurs! (Gentlemen!). We feel that in each case it is the same expression; and yet there are variations of delivery and intonation which give rise in the several instances to very noticeable phonetic differences... Furthermore, this feeling of identity persists in spite of the fact that from a semantic point of view too there is no absolute reduplication from one Messieurs! to the next. A word can express quite different ideas without seriously compromising its identity... (Saussure 1916: 151, translated by Roy Harris 1972 [1986]: 107; my emphasis, RO)

Several additional examples are then provided, all making the same point. Saussure’s claim that in each instance of use the word expresses quite different ideas closely resembles the Columbia School’s notion that in each communication the same meaning can contribute to a different message effect; Saussure’s claim that we are faced with the same unit is the same as the Columbia School’s notion that in conveying different messages we still may be making use of one signal with one meaning.

Finally, Saussure was clear, as are Columbia School scholars, that this linguistic meaning was not a given but rather had to be discovered through analysis.
The link between two uses of the same word is not based upon material identity, nor upon exact similarity of meaning, but upon factors the linguist must discover, if he is to come anywhere near to revealing the true nature of linguistic units. (Saussure 1916: 152, translated by Roy Harris 1972 [1986]: 107)

In short, the Columbia School’s position that linguistic meaning is not in the phenomena, and that it is to be discovered by the linguist and kept conceptually distinct from the communicated messages to which meanings contribute has clear Saussurean roots.

5. Structure and meaning in the tradition

The two issues on which the mainstream formalists and functionalists stack up against the Saussurean and Columbia School positions – the status of observed structure and of observed meaning – are not two, but one. The assumptions of a priori structure and of a priori linguistic meaning that Saussure and the Columbia School criticize are in reality a single assumption. Again using Syntactic Structures as the ideal illustration, we note that Chomsky assumes that the shooting of the hunters has exactly two meanings for the simple reason that it manifests two different grammatical relations.

Consider the phrase “the shooting of the hunters”, which can be understood ambiguously with “hunters” as the subject . . . or the object . . . (Chomsky 1957: 88)

Under one interpretation hunters is subject of shooting (as lions is subject of growling) and under another one hunters is object of shooting (as flowers is object of raising). The reason that the communication offered in (8) is not mentioned as a third interpretation by Chomsky is that, even though it is not parallel to the raising of flowers, it shares with the flowers example the interpretation of hunters as object.

This amalgamation of meaning and structure is perfectly transparent in Chomsky. Being a subject and being an object, which have to do with structure, are ways of being understood, which have to do with meaning. At this initial stage of analysis, where the phenomena of language are being observed and shaped through the a priori categories of the tradition, meaning and structure are completely amalgamated.
Again here, Chomsky considers an alternative possibility but discards it:

It is true that "the shooting of the hunters" may be presented ambiguously with "shoot" taken either as a transitive or an intransitive verb, but the essential fact here is that the grammatical relation in "the shooting of the hunters" is ambiguous (i.e., "hunters" may be subject or object). (Chomsky 1957: 88-89n; my emphasis, RO)

Two points deserve careful note. Ambiguities and grammatical relations are part of the phenomena; they are essential facts. Second, ambiguity, which is part of observed meaning, is a property of a grammatical relation, which is part of observed structure.

This blend of structure and meaning helps Chomsky to establish similarities between sentences. The comments made above with regard to John played tennis and My friend likes music are repeated here:

We expect that these sequences should somehow be 'understood' in a similar manner. . . . It is evident that in some sense they are similarly understood. (Chomsky 1957: 86)

The "some sense" in which these sentences are "similarly understood" is that they are understood through the structural constructs of subject and object, on the basis of which they can be seen as similar.

We had seen this blend of observable structure and observable meaning in Chomsky before, in the discussion of declaratives and interrogatives, which is repeated here:

Any grammar of English will classify the sentences in the manner indicated [as declaratives and interrogatives] . . . and any speaker of English will understand the sentences according to this pattern.
(Chomsky 1957: 91; my emphasis, RO)

Looking more closely at the blend of linguistic meaning and structure, we should ask what makes linguists think they can observe it, what provides the handles they think they are grabbing as speech rumbles by. By dint of repeatedly using the word "structure", and looking at the associated diagrams, some may have convinced themselves that they can actually observe, in Saussure's phrase, "an incorporeal syntax." But while in linguistic analysis it is reasonable (though probably incorrect) to conceive of syntactic structure as something one
posits and justifies, it simply makes no sense to think of it as a given. No one can observe, to continue with Saussurean phraseology, "inmaterial abstractions hovering above the actual words." Nichols cannot look at her exotic languages and find, as she says, a "clause skeleton." In the speech of her informants there are no bones, nor columns, beams or joists. Nothing hovers over their words.

If not structure, what is it then that is being observed? The answer is: notional aspects of meaning, understood and processed through antecedently given conceptual categories. To the isolated strings of the language under study, to the specimens lying on the cluttered bench, these scholars apply notional categories that have been given the status of universal linguistic meanings. These universal meanings are then granted the privilege of transmutation into universal relational structure. Ultimately, the a priori of such linguistics is purely conceptual. There is nothing that is not conceptual, for example, in the two ways that the hunters is observed to relate to shooting. What the formalist or functionalist who claims to observe aspects of structure is really doing is taking elements of conceptual substance and reifying them into relational or graphic metaphors that are then raced as linguistic structure. But it should be clear that the beginning of the process, what gets these scholars started, is an observation of certain notional aspects of the message articulated in terms of a franchised set of traditional constructs, of "ways of understanding." No one finds structure in utterances they do not understand.

Seen in this light, it is clear that the initial approach to all languages, even the exotic ones, involves an initial question that may appear structural but is in fact conceptual. It may seem to have to do with a clause skeleton, but it has to do with conceptual aspects of imagined communication. What the linguist who claims to be able to observe structure is always asking is: given one of my a priori notions (subject, reflexive, tense, indirect object, or whatever) which of them does this sentence express and how does it express it? And, using these notions, how many meanings does it express, how many structural relations does it exemplify? In more general terms, given my antecedently given stock of categories of meaning (which I will soon graduate to categories of structure), how does this language encode them?
6. A language is not a nomenclature

This position is exactly antithetical to what the instructor was trying to teach in those lectures at Geneva. The central holding of Saussure’s theoretical position is that there are no ideas to encode independently of language, that there are no antecedent concepts for a language to express; in short, and to use the Saussurean terminology, that a language is not a nomenclature (Culler 1976: 13ff; Harris 1988: 7-19, 47-61). Saussure’s point is made in the well known opening sentence of Part I, Chapter 1 of the Cours.

For some people a language reduced to its essentials is a nomenclature: a list of terms corresponding to a list of things. . . . This conception is open to a number of objections. It assumes that ideas already exist independently of words. (Saussure 1916: 97, translated by Roy Harris 1972 [1986]: 65).

Saussure had made the same point in an earlier passage that dealt with the history of linguistics.

In the first place, there is the superficial view taken by the public, which sees language merely as a nomenclature. This is a view which stifles any inquiry into the true nature of linguistic structure. (Saussure 1916: 34, translated by Roy Harris 1972 [1986]: 16)

Saussure’s rejection of the conception of language as a nomenclature was tied to his central insight about the arbitrariness of the sign. Because the confusion persists (e.g., Pinker 1994: 83), it must be said again that by describing the sign as arbitrary Saussure was not primarily concerned with the conventional nature of the connection between signifiant and signifié. Rather, the term arbitrariness captures the fact that the signifiés of each language constitute a language-specific set of linguistic meanings that can only be discovered through analysis. These language-specific contents will elude nomenclaturists because their initial look at the language is through the lens of the antecedently given semantic-structural categories of the tradition. For Saussure, then, the rejection of nomenclaturism, coupled with the adoption of arbitrariness, amounts to a rejection of the proposition that a language contains and offers up for inspection a set of sentences organized in terms of traditional concepts, whether these concepts are openly presented as categories of meaning or under the cloak of categories of structure.
According to de Mauro (1967), Charles Bally and the other editors of the Cours underestimated the importance of the claim by Saussure that meaning and structure cannot be observed, and failed to appreciate the connection between anti-nomenclaturism and the arbitrariness of the inventory of signifiés. The order in which the editors presented ideas in the Cours and their utilization of examples based on nomenclaturist principles suggest that Saussure’s anti-nomenclaturist stance was difficult for the editors to understand (the editors have Saussure say that oechs in German and boeuf in French are two words for “the same animal”, suggesting, contra Saussure, that both words have the same signifié). And not only for the editors. The field as a whole has found the principle difficult to understand.

It is clear in the manuscript sources that Saussure insistently criticized the conception of language as a nomenclature ... However, this critique was obscured by the editors of the Cours, as it has been since by a significant part of contemporary linguistics, which has failed to understand it, and continues to follow the nomenclaturist, Aristotelian conception of language.... The notion of the arbitrariness of the sign has remained obscured by an unfortunate example, and by a superficial interpretation. Saussure’s notion is based on the discovery of the arbitrariness of the groupings of significations into discrete meanings, a discovery connected to the criticism of the conception of language as a nomenclature. (de Mauro 1967 [1972, 1990]: 427; my translation, RO)

Anti-nomenclaturism is at the heart of Saussure’s profound and innovative view of language. From it springs Saussure’s opposition to the tradition. The “grammar of the Greeks and the French” is not for him wrong simply, or primarily, because it is prescriptive, but because it assumes so much about the language before studying it. Syntax is not rejected because it is incorporeal but because it relies on an a priori set of constructs. The sentence and the associated categories are set aside not because they are traditional but because they are antecedent to analysis and located in the observations.

Yet the central anti-nomenclaturist tenet of Saussure has attracted only a limited number of adherents. As de Mauro puts it:
[The *Course*, one of the most cited and best known texts in the history of 20th century culture, appears nonetheless profoundly isolated in the midst of that culture (de Mauro 1967 [1972, 1990]: xiv; my translation, RO)]

The lack of acceptance of Saussure’s central insight stems in part, and especially in the U.S., from opposition to his ideas by leading and influential figures in this century, who brushed aside rather than confronted or refuted the Saussurean position. Bloomfield (1923) and Chomsky (1964: 23) both misrepresented Saussure when they chide him for his inattention to syntax, as if this were an unfortunate oversight rather than what it is: a principled objection to an enterprise that, from a Saussurean perspective, is always hopelessly nomenclaturalist. Still, and even though the Saussurean challenge to syntacticians has never been answered, the misrepresentation of Saussure’s principled exclusion of syntax as a kind of thoughtless omission has apparently been convincing.

The more serious reason for why the pivotal Saussurean idea of anti-nomenclaturalism and arbitrariness is difficult to accept is that it clashes with a central tenet of much of contemporary linguistics, namely universal grammar. In lexis, where the ideas of universality have not penetrated as deeply, Saussure’s thought has made greater inroads. But to be a Saussurean in grammar, to start grammatical analyses from scratch, to shun the traditional categories as ways of shaping the observations, to really believe that the newly encountered language has many unique grammatical aspects – and that since one doesn’t know which ones they are, one has to first treat all of it as unique – this has proven too much for scholars brought up on doctrines of universalism to accept.

Many other Saussurean ideas have been accepted by linguists. Synchrony, the notion of oppositions, the analogy between languages and games. But the Columbia School appears to stand out in the extent to which it is able to recognize that languages must be approached with the conviction that we know precious little about them ahead of time, and that their grammar may end up looking, after analysis, as unique as their lexicons.
7. **Summary and conclusion**

For most linguists, there are substantial aspects of linguistic structure that are observable in the phenomena, and observable, moreover, in the form of traditional grammatical relations. As the analysis is developed and new aspects of structure are tested and justified, these traditional structural relations get a free pass, and are promoted from units of observation to units of analysis without scrutiny. There are also substantial aspects of linguistic meaning that are held to be given in the phenomena, and given, moreover, in a tangible form which is discrete, countable, and amenable to observation even in conditions of isolation.

On both these counts, the Columbia School disagrees. First, no aspect of the structure of a language is believed to be readily observable in the data; all structure is the product of analysis, these analyses being themselves for the most part free of the constructs of the tradition. Second, linguistic meanings in Columbia School work are distinct from communicated messages; they too are not given and must be discovered through analysis. Individual lexical and grammatical signals, which are themselves hypotheses, bear a stable linguistic meaning. But strings of these signal-meaning pairs brought together for the nonce in order for the speaker to effect a single communication do not contain linguistic meaning. To stress their lack of linguistic status, the transient and contingent notional effect these strings help to convey is called a message. Messages are not part of language. They are the product of language when language is deployed in a context.

These ideas are not identical with, but have clear roots in, the insights expressed in the *Cours* that language is not a nomenclature, that its units are unobservable, that meanings are arbitrary, that *signifiés* are different from *significations* and that the sentence and related concepts belong in speech rather than in language. But these radical Saussurean ideas have received only limited currency. The persistence of tradition, the attractive rationalism of universal grammar, the appealing prospect of studying all languages under a common set of observational categories, and the conviction by formalists and functionalists that good empirical results are being obtained have prevented them from taking wider hold.

The more palatable of Saussure’s ideas have been adopted, allowing the field to claim a Saussurean heritage without having to face the challenge posed by anti-nomenclaturism and arbitrariness. As part of this process, the term
arbitrariness has been redefined to mean simply the conventional character of the form-meaning pairing, and the injunction against nomenclaturism has been ignored. Thus repackaged, it is a kind of “Saussure light” that is now part of the canon. Today, there is no way to know whether this selective acceptance of marginal Saussurean ideas coupled with the rejection of the central ones has, on the whole, contributed in positive ways to our understanding of language. Only future generations will know whether the crop of empirical analyses yielded by the current cycle of rationalist universalism in linguistics stands the test of time to the same extent that it has enjoyed current favor.

Two features of Columbia School thus realize in linguistic analyses the insights adumbrated but not worked out by Saussure. First, the practice of handling data without relying on antecedently given formal or relational structure; and second, the standard that forms and meanings must be testable hypotheses that together make up the discovered structure of language. Of course, here too there is no way to know whether this more complete acceptance of Saussurean ideas has, on the whole, made a positive contribution to our understanding of language. Only future generations will know whether the empirical analyses produced under strict adherence to the principle that all structure is to be discovered and none to be observed stand the test of time better than have the Saussurean principles on which they are based.

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References


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