

*The definition of the **SIGN** and the question of what its parts are called are just preliminaries to what Saussure called his first principle:*

THE LINGUISTIC SIGN IS ARBITRARY

The LINGUISTIC SIGN is **Arbitrary**. Rivers of ink have flowed in the discussion of this notion. To keep clear about what Saussure meant by it, we have to remember that his SIGN has two parts, and that what is arbitrary (determined by choice; randomly chosen) is **making the connection** between them. Language can make any connection it chooses.



not arbitrary, there would be only one language in the world.

But even though the SIGN is arbitrary as far as the connection between its SIGNIFIER and SIGNIFIED goes, it is not arbitrary for language users. If it were, everybody could come up with whatever SIGNS they wanted, and communication would break down.

When the first language came into existence, when the first word (SIGN) came into existence, any sound or sequence of sounds (SIGNIFIER) could have been chosen to express any concept (SIGNIFIED). The proof of arbitrariness is that when different languages came into existence they developed different SIGNS, different links between SIGNIFIERS and SIGNIFIEDS. If the LINGUISTIC SIGN were



The principle of the arbitrariness of the linguistic SIGN operates in connection with Saussure's second principle:



(The Signifier is Linear)

"Linear" makes us think of space, and a printed SIGNIFIER (such as any of the words you are reading here) is linear. But Saussure is thinking primarily of time when he says 'linear.' A spoken SIGNIFIER is just as linear as a written one, because whenever it is more complex than a single sound (which is almost always the case), it occurs in a sequence over time. That makes it linear. Compare the following examples:

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| TOP | AT THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN |
| one word | six words |
| one SIGNIFIER | six SIGNIFIERS |
| three sounds | seventeen sounds |

The second example is more complex, but both are linear.

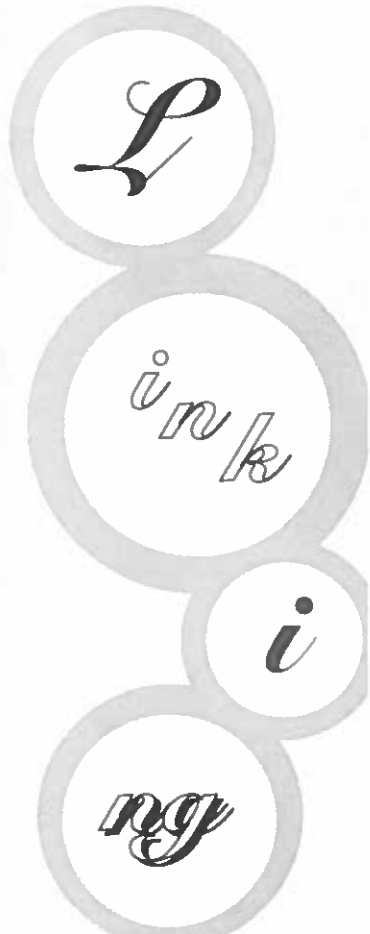
Saussure does not give many details in discussing the principle of linearity, but he tells us that the operation of language depends on it. He goes so far as to say that its consequences are profound, and in fact they are. Why? Because

linearity keeps us from seeing or hearing a SIGNIFIER or SIGNIFIERS all at once. The big difference between the linearity of the SIGNIFIER and the arbitrariness of the SIGN is that the first is like a chain, but the second is just one link.

*A*OW AND WHY THE LINGUISTIC SIGN IS UNCHANGABLE

Saussure moves on from his concept of the two-part SIGN to the relationship between the SIGN and its users. Here he detects a paradox (a statement that seems contrary to common sense but is nonetheless probably true): language is free to set up a link between any sound (or sequence of sounds) and any idea, but once the link is made, neither an individual speaker nor the whole community of speakers is free to undo it. They are not free to replace that link by another one either.

For example: the English language could have chosen some other sequence of sounds than the three in "top" to express the idea of the highest part of an object (and other languages did), but now it is here to stay. Governments cannot legislate a word out of existence. Why? Because it was never legislated **into** existence.



There are other ways to explain why LINGUISTIC SIGNS cannot be modified at will, but Saussure prefers the one linked to a principle he has already set out -- the arbitrariness of the SIGN. Since the SIGN is arbitrary, there is no reason to prefer one particular SIGNIFIER-SIGNIFIED combination over any other. Arbitrariness makes it impossible to argue the relative merits of SIGNS in any rational way.

How could all the speakers of English be convinced to start using some other way of expressing the idea of "top"?



It will never work, you know. The SIGN is arbitrary.

Yeah! Well, maybe I could get a better sign, brighter paint, bolder typeface...



No, no! I mean the linguistic sign. The word "top" is a sign. Sounds linked to a concept. Its arbitrariness keeps it in place in the language system.

The Establishment's in on this arbitrariness thing, right?



It isn't easy teaching linguistics.

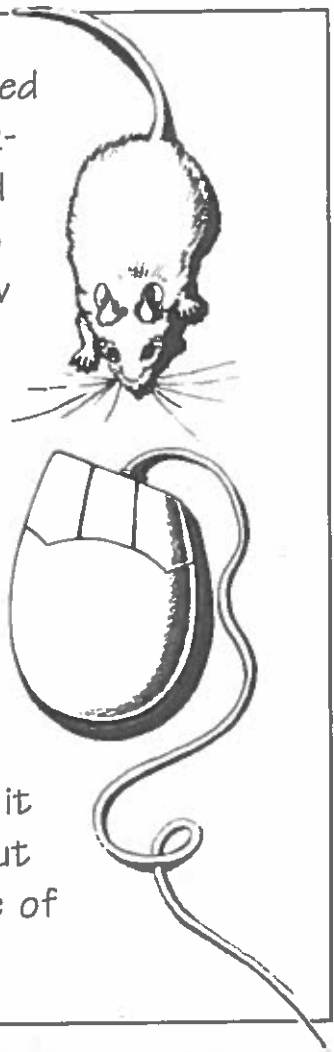
*N*OW AND WHY THE LINGUISTIC SIGN IS CHANGEABLE

Over time, language and its SIGNS change. New SIGNIFIER-SIGNIFIED links may replace old ones or add to their number. "Tide" used to mean "period" or "season," now it means "periodic rise and fall of water level";

"mouse" used to mean only a type of small rodent, till personal computers were invented and brought with them a new meaning of "mouse" that coexists comfortably with the old one.

Saussure has just finished teaching us that the SIGNIFIER-SIGNIFIED link is arbitrary and that this arbitrariness prevents linguistic change by design; now it appears that the same arbitrariness permits language to change. If the SIGN were not arbitrary, the new meanings of "tide" and "mouse" could never have developed.

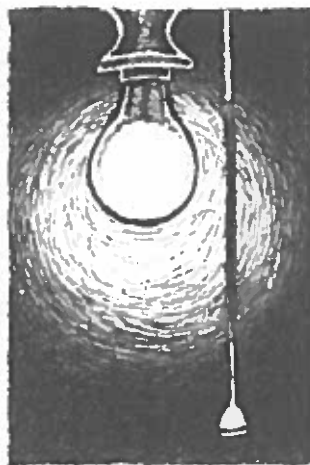
The arbitrariness of the SIGN is a tough concept. Saussure had to start with it because other principles turn out to be a necessary consequence of it.



**Linguistics can study language
AT ONE POINT IN TIME or
ITS DEVELOPMENT OVER TIME.**

Saussure talks about two ways of analyzing language -- SYNCHRONIC and DIACHRONIC. Why did he choose these terms? If you know the Latin words they come from, you can answer this question, but nowadays most people don't know Latin. (Latin: Synchronous = same time; Diachronous = through time.)

Over time, language evolves and signs do change.



So let's clarify by asking the same question about names for dogs. Why Spot? Obviously, because the dog has spots on his body? Why Rover? Because he likes to rove. Here is a pair of names you can do something with. Since SYNCHRONIC means at one spot in time, and DIACHRONIC means at different points in time, you can turn SYNCHRONIC and DIACHRONIC into SPOT and ROVER to remind you which is which.

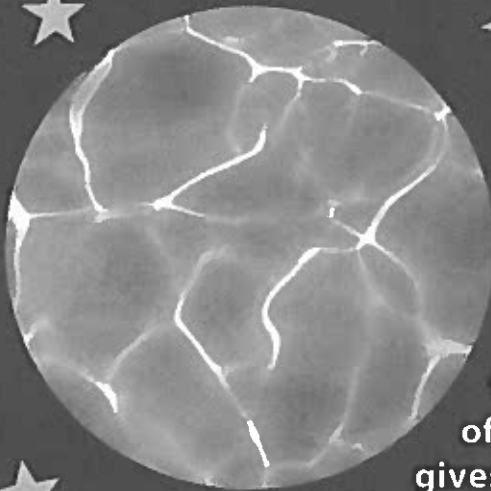
Language cannot be fully described apart from an account of the community that uses it and the effects of time. But the description cannot be accurate unless language as a SYSTEM is viewed separately from the effects of time on that system. So, Saussure divides linguistics into SYNCHRONIC and DIACHRONIC. A SYNCHRONIC STUDY examines the relations among co-existing elements of a language and is therefore independent of any time factor by def-

state of the language SYSTEM. The notion of a system implies that, if the account is valid, it will present that state as a whole of interacting elements. By contrast, a DIACHRONIC STUDY describes an evolution in which only fragments of states of a language at different times are relevant to the account.



For the linguist, aiming at a complete description of a language, SYNCHRONIC and DIACHRONIC analysis have to go together; for a community of language speakers, SYNCHRONIC and DIACHRONIC facts do not come together. When a language system is put to use in speech or writing, only SYNCHRONIC elements come into play. Nobody needs to know the

history of a language to be able to master its system. Moreover, DIACHRONIC facts do not alter the SYSTEM as system. To illustrate this point, Saussure offers an analogy: If one of the planets of our solar system changed weight and dimensions, those changes would disturb the equilibrium of the whole, but it would remain a whole.



The comparison with the planets tells us about SYNCHRONIC facts, about the data of linguistics. Saussure gives another analogy to tell us about DIACHRONIC facts, about the method of linguistics. He found his inspiration for this one closer to home--the Swiss Alps: