

Race and Language in the Two Saussures

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Literary theorists are accustomed to talking about the two Saussures—in the sense of the author of the *Course in General Linguistics* (1916; given 1907-11) and the altogether stranger author of *Words upon Words* (Saussure 1974, 1983; Starobinski 1979).¹ In *Words upon Words*, Saussure attempted to prove that the acronyms of individual authors were concealed in the letters of the lines of Latin poetry. He never, however, solved the problem that the effects he was analysing could have been simply random—a mirror image, curiously, of the argument with respect to the arbitrariness of the signifier in the *Course*. In the latter he attempts to create a concept of language detached from individual determination, as well as biological or psychological origins in race and nation; in the former he attempts to turn the language of

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poetry into an acronymic instantiation, unconscious or intentional, of its authorial origins. There is also a third, almost forgotten Saussure, the professional academic Sanskritist whose major work in this area consisted of the analysis of vowel and case variations in Sanskrit texts (Saussure 1879). While general claims have been made that some of the major ideas of Saussure's *Course* were derived from the Sanskrit grammarians, Vajpeyi's detailed demonstration of their relation has shown that the issue cannot be separated from the larger and more complex question of the role of Sanskrit in enabling the formation of Historical Linguistics and Comparative Grammar as a discipline in the first place (Spivak 1991: 236; Vajpeyi 1996). These internal differences within Saussure's work are themselves repeated externally as the differences between two actual Saussures, the well-known linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and his rather lesser known brother, Léopold.

Ferdinand (1857-1913)

Of all Saussure's ideas, that of difference has perhaps been the most influential beyond his own realm of linguistics, and remains central to current notions of ethnic and gender identities. What is remarkable is that Saussure, in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, should have formulated a notion of difference as performative—difference without positive terms, as he put it—when the context in which he was writing was so replete with notions of difference as a positive term, that is, difference as the basis of the gap between core material identities. This is what he says:

Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*. (166; 120)

However, at the same time, Saussure also suggests that when the two negative differences of signifier and signified are put together in the sign, 'their combination is a positive fact'. Signs are 'positive terms' composed of two negative differentials: 'When we compare signs—positive terms—with each other, we can no longer speak of difference.... two signs, each having a signified and a signifier, are not different but only distinct. Between them is only *opposition*' (167; 121). Signs are, then, distinct rather than different. Though the sign, one might say, gives the appearance of substantive difference, in practice it is only constituted, by a double negative, as opposition. This corollary to Saussure's theory, which leads us back to what Toman characterises as 'the stiff Saussurean world of antinomies', has been neglected in contemporary theorisations of difference for which Saussure remains an ultimate reference point (Toman 1995; for an exception, see Weber 1976). In simple terms, it means that identity, for example, would be oppositional rather than differential, which would challenge some of the thinking associated with contemporary identity politics. Moreover, difference itself is predicated on an idea of a system that is impersonal and not amenable to individual choice, which refuses any assumption that it can form the basis for a personalised model of individual identity. Nevertheless, it does remain a non-essentialist account.

Saussure's emphasis on the value and meaning of

language resulting from its form not its substance was made in the context of a highly political agenda among his contemporaries. One of the main objects of the *Course* was in fact to remove the study of language from its politicised role in cultural analysis. Saussure was the founder of linguistics as an autonomous discipline precisely because he ruthlessly excluded all considerations other than linguistic ones. In particular, he detached the study of language from any identification with or considerations of race, in a context in which philology was still being used for a variety of cultural-political purposes. Since William Jones had first suggested, and Franz Bopp elaborated, the idea of an Indo-European language family, as a result of their encounter with a Sanskrit previously unknown in the West—as has already been mentioned, Saussure himself was a Sanskrit scholar, like many nineteenth-century historical philologists, for example Nietzsche—the idea of the Indo-Europeans as a superior civilising race, derived in part from the irresistible implications of the metaphor of the family and tree, had been promoted by linguists such as Ernst Renan in France, and the German Max Müller in Britain (Davies 1998: 185). Max Müller was particularly influential in the middle of the century in promoting a general notion of an Anglophone Aryan culture founded, ultimately, on linguistic evidence. His extreme position in this respect was represented by his defence of the British occupation of India on the grounds that it represented a second Aryan invasion.

However, the rise of a corporeal ethnology, racial science, increasingly made the simple identification of language and race more problematic. In the face of the growing German nationalism evident in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, in later life both Renan and Max

Müller began to backtrack on one—perhaps the most powerful—version of the language and race equation, that is the absolute identification of language and nation. Saussure describes the correlation of nationality with language as one of the fundamental mistakes of the earliest Indo-European scholars (286; 209). Given that he was himself Swiss, a citizen of a country which, as he put it, allowed ‘the coexistence of several [linguistic] idioms’ (41; 20), it is easy to see that Saussure might have reasons for being out of sympathy with this notion so dear to cultures such as the French and the German that have striven for linguistic unity. Saussure, however, went much further than criticism of any intrinsic link to the nation. It is equally a mistake, he insists, to go so far ‘as to see language as an attribute, not of the nation, but of the race, in the same way as the color of the skin or the shape of the head’ (262; 191). In a remarkable section on ‘Language and Race’, he insists that any identification between the two is ‘largely an illusion’.

It would be wrong to assume that a common language implies consanguinity, that a family of languages matches an anthropological family. The facts are not so simple. There is, for instance, a Germanic race with distinct anthropological characteristics: blond hair, elongated cranium, high stature, etc; the Scandinavian is its most perfect example. Still, not all populations who speak Germanic languages fit this description.... Consanguinity and linguistic community apparently have no necessary connection and we cannot draw conclusions from one and apply them to another. (304-5; 222-3)

In one simple assertion, Saussure dismisses almost a whole century of philological assumptions, including

those of his own teacher and mentor, Adolphe Pictet, who had sought to affiliate language and race. However, notice that his objection is focussed on using evidence of the one in relation to the other, not against the notion of race as such, a concept to which he evidently fully subscribes, but on exclusively scientific physiological grounds. (I do not use the term 'pseudo-scientific' because it makes us too complacent about our own science. Commentators who use the term, moreover, seem to be unaware that certain forms of racial science still constitute an element in contemporary medicine and human physiology.) In the same vein, Saussure also denies that linguistic changes have any relation to other historical events, such as political upheavals, though he allows that the effects of discontinuity produced by historical acts such as colonisation can play a role in accounting for linguistic differences (286; 209). Saussure's emphasis on arbitrariness, so famous in his account of the sign, which he himself derived from Whitney and which in fact can be found as far back as Locke, works right through his account of linguistic change, and demonstrates the influences of a Darwinist evolutionary perspective: language is a self-enclosed institution, whose processes involve arbitrary, not organic, changes and in which characteristics endure by 'sheer luck' (*'un effet du hasard'*, 316; 231). '*Change itself ... in short, the instability of language'*, Saussure argues, '*stems from time alone'* (272, 198-9).

More striking still than this detachment of language from race is Saussure's argument, in an apparently modern form, that while race is not necessary for a linguistic community, language does possess another kind of unity, '*constituted by the social bond: ethnisme'*, a word variously translated as '*ethnic unity'* and '*ethnic-*

ity'. This word was in fact invented by Saussure himself, and seems to have been a nonce word, in that the only French dictionary that includes it, the *Trésor de la langue française*, cites Saussure's definition as its only example (CNRS 1971-1994). The dictionary defines it, alongside Saussure's definition, as the 'ensemble of bonds which unites groups of individuals sharing a common socio-cultural inheritance, particularly language'. The closest current term '*ethnie*', which first appeared in Larousse in 1930, is defined as a 'group of human beings who possess, more or less for the most part, a common socio-cultural heritage, particularly language', with an example from 1956 making the distinction between race and ethnicity. Robert defines '*ethnie*' as a 'mass of individuals who share a certain number of traits of civilisation, notably the community of language and of culture', illustrating it with an example which distinguishes between race, nation, and '*ethnie*' (Robert 1960). As Engler's edition of the original student lecture notes from which Saussure's *Course* was reconstituted by its editors makes very clear, Saussure himself made no such distinction, but rather identified the two:

Another observation. If it is immediately assumed that language is something geographically diverse, should one not regard it as ethnically diverse? This question is very complex. The idea of race is mixed up with this difference noted in speech. Undoubtedly one could go beyond geographical diversity, but the relations between language and ethnism is more complex.
(Saussure 1967-1974, III 438/3)

Language only operates as a characteristic of race, Saussure continues, when it persists through time. It is

this condition of variation or non-variation through time that Saussure identifies with an 'ethnic' identity. In the published text of the *Course*, where Saussure's identifications between race and language have been carefully edited out, '*ethnisme*' is defined as the unity constituted by a social-political bond that makes the linguistic group. Saussure defines it as follows:

Let us understand by this a unity based on the multiple relations of religion, civilization, common defense, etc., which spring up even among nations of different races and in the absence of any political bond. (305; 223)

Even here, however, Saussure's definition is strikingly ambiguous and contradictory. The linguistic community first of all can be multi-racial, and can occur in the absence of any political bond: what is significant is that it should have a common civilisation and religion. However, the word civilisation begs a lot of questions—what defines a civilisation has never been easy to specify. The requirement of a common religion also seems problematic—does this exclude the French Protestants from the French linguistic community? And if '*ethnisme*' requires a common defence, this sounds like a version of a nation, but the possibility of the absence of any political bond also makes this equation unlikely. Saussure seems rather to be describing relatively small-scale local communities, somewhat on the model of a geographical region, communities who will share a common language and local culture. From his emphasis towards the end of the *Course* on the ways in which a language, such as French, is not uniform across a nation, but rather a mosaic of changing dialects, whose characteristics overlap, this common language would involve a regional dialect with

local accent, vocabulary and particular syntactic forms. Unless it describes this notion of a common dialect or language (Saussure argues that the difference between the two is hard to specify) within a linguistic zone bordered by boundaryless 'innovating waves', Saussure's '*ethnisme*' remains something of a chimera, since he defines it in terms of a group constituted by a social bond which creates a language community, which then in turn, 'in a certain measure', creates ethnic unity (Saussure 1967-1974, IV, 497/1). Saussure's circular argument is thus that a social bond creates a linguistic bond, which creates an ethnic bond, which guarantees the relatively permeable boundaries of a language which then does not have to be defined in other than linguistic terms.

In making this argument for a social concept of ethnicity, rather than a biological concept of race, Saussure seems in certain respects strikingly modern, given that the term ethnic, in French as in English, was commonly used at that time as the adjectival form of race (and Saussure himself sometimes uses it in this sense); the term ethnicity was not invented in English until 1953. Even today, the boundaries between race and ethnicity are still very fluid. However, Saussure is not using a notion of ethnicity as a more acceptable substitute for a discredited notion of race, as in the modern western formulation, but as a concurrent alternative to it. In his invention of '*ethnisme*', Saussure is essentially following Whitney's argument that linguistics forms a part of the social rather than the natural sciences: the point was to find a social rather than a biological concept such as race in which to anchor language. Beyond that, his strategy is focussed absolutely on his aim of removing the study of language from any other social and cultural considerations, in his promotion of language as a phenomenon

worth studying in its own right and exclusively in its own terms. From Saussure's point of view, his significant argument is less in the detail of his theory of the sign, or in his account of the relation of language to ethnicity, than the 'fundamental argument' of his course in relation to his own discipline that '*the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself*' (317; 232, Saussure's emphasis). His deliberately vague definition of '*ethnisme*' betrays the moment in which his account of language has to encounter the 'social bond' that gives it the unity to make up a *langue*. At this point, the purely formal analysis of 'abstract objectivism' has to encounter what, after Saussure, we might call 'the positive fact'.

Having accepted that linguistic unity predicates a social community of some sort, Saussure does his best to keep the two separate and to minimise any defining determining relation between the two. He suggests that language only rarely reveals minimal details regarding the nature of this 'common ethnic unity', and effectively rejects the whole project of 'linguistic palaeontology', associated with the work of the arch Aryanists Adolphe Pictet, in his book *Origines indo-européennes. Essai de paléontologie linguistique* (1859-63), and Max Müller, who used language to reconstruct a whole racial history. In the 'Linguistic Type and Mind of the Social Group', Saussure similarly dismisses notions of the application of a race psychology to language, rejecting the idea that phonetic changes are caused by 'racial predispositions' (202-3; 147). He then reverses the perspective, to ask:

Does language, even if it fails to supply much precise and authentic information about the customs [*moeurs*] and institutions of speakers, serve at least to characterise the mental type of the social group that speaks it? A

popular notion is that a language reflects the psychological character of a nation. But one serious objection opposes this viewpoint: linguistic procedures are not necessarily determined by psychological causes. (310-11; 227, translation modified)

Saussure produces a series of examples to demonstrate his thesis that 'the psychological character of a linguistic group is unimportant by comparison with the elimination of a vowel, a change of accent, or many other similar things that may at any moment revolutionise the relation between the sign and the idea in any language form whatsoever'. The determinations of languages and the classification of languages according to the 'procedures that they use for expressing thought', he contends, allow the linguist to 'draw no certain conclusions outside the domain of linguistics proper' (312; 228, translation modified). Saussure concludes that

We now realize that Schleicher was wrong in looking upon language as an organic thing with its own law of evolution, but we continue, without suspecting it, to try to make language organic in another sense by assuming that the 'genius' of a race or ethnic group tends constantly to lead language along certain determined routes. (317; 231-2).

These theses of arbitrariness and a negative account of difference thus all work in the service of an argument that is resolutely anti-biological, anti-historical and anti-psychological—as far as language is concerned at any rate.

Léopold (1866-1925)

What is notable about this whole argument is that it stands in direct contradiction to the fundamental basis of a book, published eight years earlier by Saussure's younger brother, Léopold de Saussure's *Psychologie de la colonisation française dans ses rapports avec les sociétés indigènes* (1899). Léopold's book was an attack on the French colonial doctrine of assimilation that was derived, via the Revolution, from an Enlightenment belief in a common liberty, equality and fraternity for humankind. Despite the prevarications of French colonial politics, from Napoleon to Jules Ferry, this had remained the effective basis of French colonial policy throughout the nineteenth century, and the foundation of the *mission civilisatrice* whose avowed aim was to bring the benefits of French culture, religion and language to the unenlightened races of the earth. There were many individual exceptions to this rule in actual practice, particularly in Indo-China, but it remained not only the general principle but also the generally agreed rule in French discussions of colonial policy. There was a paradox contained within this policy: on the one hand, it was the most progressive, to the extent that it assumed the fundamental equality of all human beings, their common humanity as part of a single species, and assumed that however 'natural' or 'backward' their state, all native peoples could immediately benefit from the uniform imposition of French culture in its most advanced contemporary manifestation. On the other hand, such an assumption meant that this model had the least respect and sympathy for the culture, language and institutions of the people being colonised—it saw difference, and sought to make it the same—what we

might call the paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism. Increasingly, however, in the course of the nineteenth century, successive writers—to name only those writing in French— Joseph Arthur comte de Gobineau, in his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, (1853-1855), and Gustave Le Bon in his *Les Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (1894), proposed the scientifically legitimated differentiation of the races into different types or species, whereby their differences were portrayed as absolute, so that education and other civilising influences were useless or of limited value because of the intellectual and cultural differences, that is, incapacities of primitive peoples (Gobineau 1853-55; Le Bon 1894). It was not to be until the very end of the century, however, that these arguments were developed as an attack on the whole basis of French colonial policy predicated on the Republican doctrine of assimilation and the transformation of natives into *evolués*. The person who made the strategic and significant move that effectively shifted French colonial policy in a different, racialised direction was none other than Léopold de Saussure, an officer in the French navy who by then had taken on French nationality. After the publication of his work on the psychology of French colonisation, he spent the rest of his life devoting himself to research into Chinese astronomy, for which he was later praised by Jacques Lacan ('geniuses tend to pop up from time to time in that family') who himself characteristically then translated the Chinese astronomical system as defined by Saussure into an illustration of the 'affinity between the enigmas of sexuality and the play of the signifier' (Lacan 1977: 151; Saussure 1930). The links between astrology and Lacanian psychoanalysis were thus firmly established.

Léopold de Saussure himself found a different set of signifiers in the realm of national psychology by means of scientific racialism and its elucidation, as he put it, of 'the anatomical structures that distinguish the various races of men' (300; C 88).² This provided a basis for Saussure and others to attack the egalitarianism of a system of assimilation based on the philosophy of the rights of man. Léopold attacks the assumption of human equality and the fundamental moral and intellectual identity of humans everywhere; at the same time, he dismisses the *philosophes'* belief that all humans are derived from a single species (299). Léopold de Saussure broadly follows Le Bon's characterisation of the differences of races according to a hierarchy of innate intellectual competence and achievement. He invokes the standard arguments for superior and inferior races as separate species (108). As a corollary of this innate difference, he suggests that the assumption of the assimilation doctrine that that difference can be bridged through the imposition of the coloniser's culture constitutes its fundamental misconception, one which it has derived from the Christian missionaries:

This commonality of origin throws light on the illusions of the assimilative school and on the transforming power it attributes to its program of action. It seeks to impose language and institutions absolutely in the same way missionaries seek to impose religious faith; that is to say, without opportunistic motives and with the conviction that this 'conversion' will suppress that

² Some sections of Saussure 1899 are translated in Curtin 1972; this translation is used when available, and page numbers are cited as C.

sole cause of the inferiority of the native races, that it will regenerate and re-establish the equality they possess in themselves, in a latent state, as members of 'mankind'. (302; C 89, translation modified)

Léopold goes on to suggest that because France's subject races are fundamentally different, then the imposition of French institutions, political and religious beliefs, and even the French language, will only cause them to degenerate in the colonial environment. Instead of translating the natives into Frenchmen, the natives' incapacity will translate French culture into more primitive forms. He illustrates this with a discussion of the effects of the colonial imposition of French education, institutions and the French language. Here his work overlaps directly that of his brother, but operates in the very mode that Ferdinand is trying to remove. Léopold argues that language 'is tied to the mentality of the race' (165). Specifically, the different linguistic forms of agglutination and inflexion correspond to a hierarchy that reflects the increasing mental powers and subtlety of reasoning of the people whose language it is. The imposition of French on a native people whose own language, and therefore mental capacity, has not developed further than, say, analogy will cause French to degenerate and regress into a bastardised creole, rather than develop the mental capacities of the natives to the level of the Aryan French (165, 170-3). Whereas assimilation theory sees differences between races as historical and cultural products resolvable through education, association theory sees them as innate, and unchangeable, constituting 'profound mental divergences which separate the races' (10), products of the different evolved physical capacities of the brain. At this point, Léopold

moves into the realm of colonial psychiatry, with its theories of inherent native inferiority, against which Fanon reacted so strongly.

Although much of the book is concerned to demonstrate the futility of the assimilative project, the main basis of Léopold's argument is not to establish the absolute cultural difference of other races, which he regards as the established scientific fact of an evolutionary anthropology, but rather to conduct a psychological analysis of the French theory of colonisation in order to explain why the French persist with the doctrine of assimilation in the face of its evident unsuitability and failure. In this perception, Saussure was right to the extent that assimilation as a policy, in Algeria for example, was sometimes completely unworkable, given that the colonial state in fact operated, as Fanon pointed out, according to an apartheid structure. According to Léopold, the particular method of colonisation adopted by individual European nations is 'imposed by the national character, by national sentiments and dogmas' (4). The real problem, he suggests, is not the dogmas as such but the hereditary psychological roots in the French people of a tendency to 'excessive centralisation which necessarily results in uniformity' (16), a problem that he names *classical latinism*. He explains this as follows:

It is a tendency towards uniformity, simplicity, and symmetry. An antipathy for all that is disparate, complex, unsymmetrical. Born of certain Roman and Judaic traditions, cultivated by the monarchy, it became a mental habit in France, a hereditary ideal, and one of the principal characteristics of the race. It begat the genius of the French language, as it did later the metric system. By contrast, in creating an exaggerated need for simple and single formulas, it substituted principles

for experience, theory for practice, fiction for a sense of reality. It has engendered the extreme centralization of the administration.... (307; C 91, translation modified)

By contrast, Saussure emphasises the advantages of what he calls the system of 'association', the empiricist colonial method of the British and Dutch (he also, more improbably, includes the Romans). Here there are no illusions of equality, but a hard pragmatic calculation, which follows 'natural law', that the best way to deal with colonised nations is to leave as much of their native culture intact as possible, which the colonial rulers then control by proxy for the advantage of commerce and their own economic profit. The British, Saussure comments, keep themselves aloof from their colonised peoples, emphasising their racial difference, a method fundamentally suitable for a situation not of colonisation, in the sense of settler colonies such as Australia, but of exploitation colonies such as India and West Africa, where the colonial rulers, not out of cultural respect but out of a pragmatic sense of the cultural inferiority of the colonised, leave their culture well alone and make little attempt to impose European cultural values—merely introducing useful infrastructural material projects such as roads and railways. With the British and Dutch system we find the opposite paradox to that of the French assimilation policy, namely that the colonial method which according to modern perspectives seems more sympathetic, leaving indigenous cultures and peoples more or less as they found them, and not superimposing a colonial culture upon them, is ironically founded on the assumption that these people are so different from Europeans, so inferior, that there is really no point in trying to impose institutions or a language which is far too sophisticated and complex for

the child-like native. 'The conquerors who have sensed the meaning of race', Léopold observes, have known perfectly how they should govern. At the same time, he expresses sympathy for and interest in the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures, a form of racialist cultural relativism that was in fact characteristic of such attitudes in the nineteenth century (305; C 90; Young 1995).

Saussure's arguments were actively taken up at the International Colonial Congress of the following year (1900), and his views became widely and rapidly accepted in the France of the Dreyfus affair (Baumgart 1982). This facilitated a change of French policy whereby at best assimilation was seen as a long-term project of considerable duration. French colonialism remained a system in organisational terms, but was increasingly split in two between French and native subjects. Administratively, the cohesive uniform attitude continued: what was jettisoned was any residual sense of human commonality (Betts 1961). The doctrine that Léopold helped to initiate was unusual in the explicitness of its view of the foundation of colonialism on an always-continuing form of force and violence, and on a strict basis of racial hierarchy. This is Jules Harmand, in the classic work of twentieth-century French colonialism, *Domination et colonisation* (1910):

The Right to domination founded on moral superiority

It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and to take as a point of departure that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, but recognizing also that, if superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in re-

turn.

The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples derives from the conviction of our superiority, not only our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but above all our moral superiority. Our dignity is founded on that quality, and it is this which underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity; our physical power is only the means. (Harmand 1910: 156)

Ferdinand vs. Léopold

In the context of his brother's arguments, and those of his fellow-travellers such as Harmand (Léopold cites Harmand's earlier Preface to the translation of Sir John Strachey's *India* (trans. 1892) with approval), let us look again at Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the linguistic community, as an '*ethnisme*' which was defined against any identification of language and race. Saussure, as I suggested, did not quarrel with the notion of race as such, and there is elsewhere evidence of racialism in Saussure's work: he makes the usual sorts of comments about savages and civilization common to most writers of his period (e.g. 261, 268; 191, 195), there is evidence outside the *Course* to indicate anti-Semitism (such as his reading of the anti-semitic journal *Libre parole*;³ cf. 316-16; 230-1), and, as we have seen, he certainly accepts the findings of physiognomy with respect to corporeal differences. He also dismisses the attempt by Bopp, Bunsen and Max Müller to prove that the family of languages show the

³ I am indebted to my research student Ananya Vajpeyi for this information, drawn from her reading of Saussure's manuscripts.

common universality of the human—Saussure argues that they in fact demonstrate ‘absolute diversity’ (263; 192 ‘the universal kinship of languages is not probable’)—an argument which was certainly used by others in support of polygenetic theories of race. On the other hand, it is noticeable that Saussure’s basic denial of the connection between language and race flatly contradicts Léopold’s fundamental thesis of the effects of race psychology. He also contradicts Léopold’s common racist argument that the physical construction of the throat and larynx of the different races determined their ability to speak in certain ways (Saussure 1899: 179). Moreover, Ferdinand makes no suggestion of the different mental capacities of different races for different levels of linguistic development. In almost every respect, in fact, Ferdinand’s definition of a linguistic community directly follows the non-racist French colonial assimilation model. The stress on cultural and religious uniformity also corresponds to assimilation theory—in Algeria, the indigenous Algerians had to renounce Islam for Christianity in order to enjoy access to French legal rights (only a handful did). At one point, Saussure even seems to accept the fiction that assimilation is a peaceful process, not one of colonial violence as Harmand stressed. Discussing the case of territories that display multilingualism, Saussure comments that the phenomenon is usually the result of one language being superimposed on another, normally by invasion ‘but’, he adds, ‘it may also come through peaceful penetration in the form of colonisation’ (267; 195). The homogeneity of a linguistic community, according to Saussure, is not the product of racial uniformity—indeed a linguistic community can be racially diverse—but of its civilization, its religion, and (normally) its ‘political bond’. Nor is it even the product

of a geographical cohesion, as one might have expected Saussure to argue given the implicit homogeneity of his concept of *la langue*. A language, Saussure takes pains to argue, has no natural geographical boundaries.

This raises the significant question of the relation of Saussure's linguistics to those of his brother Léopold. In his important pioneering analysis of Léopold's 'colonial linguistics', John Joseph has argued that Saussure's notion of *langue*, as well as his account of 'ethnicity', can be interpreted as having affinities to certain of Léopold's and Le Bon's notions of race as a historical and psychological construction (Joseph 1999: 7-8). Saussure nevertheless ends the *Course* by denying the idea that the 'genius' of race or ethnic group can determine the development of language in certain directions. As Joseph points out, Saussure also firmly refuses the idea of language being the product of history in any direct way. Moreover, the emphasis on 'multiple relations' implies that it is not necessary for the system to be absolutely homogenous and bounded; it is open rather than closed and can clearly be made up of a variety of different elements in different degrees. The system is one that includes diversity: even unilingual countries, like France, he argues, display a diversity of dialects that is the product of temporal change and geographical diversity. France and Italy are geographically a gradual succession of dialects, differences that are only arbitrarily divided by national boundaries (279; 204). It is ethnic unity (*ethnisme*) which creates the cultural bonds that join linguistic communities, while conversely linguistic community 'is to some extent responsible for ethnic unity (*'unité ethnique'*; 306; 223). Whatever Saussure really means by '*ethnisme*', it is clearly supposed to represent a social category differentiated from the contemporary

discourses of the biologism, psychologism and historicism of 'race', and thus an antithetical argument to that of his brother Léopold. It is also the point, as the problems interpreting what he means by '*ethnisme*' indicate, where Ferdinand has to touch upon the problematic realm of materiality and the social foundation of language which otherwise he wishes to deny.

So the two Saussures, though commonly steeped in, and accepting, the developments of contemporary anthropology, what is sometimes referred to as scientific racialism, and the evolutionary thesis of human difference, in fact stand on opposite sides with respect to colonial models. They have two different notions of difference, one based on organic substantive assumptions about racial (and hence linguistic) identity, and innate racial characteristics, and the other, based on an attempt to separate human languages, and indeed implicitly their cultures, from non-linguistic historical and psychological categories through a notion of difference that is one of form, not substance. What is striking about the positions of the two brothers is that, as I have suggested, they illustrate how the competing colonial models each stand on both sides of the moral equation—the first denying difference in the name of equality, and the second affirming difference in the name of inequality. I want now in conclusion to spell out some of the contemporary implications of this.

The French colonial theory of assimilation was essentially an extension of a model that was simultaneously applied internally to the state—the drive for centralization, as Saussure observes, has a long history in France. Either the King was trying to control the nobles, or the revolutionary government was trying to control the conservative provinces. The tight uniformity of a

centralised administration was also part and parcel of the general enlightenment assumption that a rational system could and should be uniformly imposed. French colonial policy was simply an extension of this (just as contemporary poststructuralism represents a challenge to its centrism in various forms). In the nineteenth century, for example, there was no colonial office because all the territories were constitutionally part of France—the colonies were simply France *d'outre-mer*. The assumption was that any people becoming part of France would be assimilated, and would wish to assimilate themselves, to this cultural uniformity. This colonial system was thus a logical extension of the system that had been set up internally for the state so as to achieve both equality and control within it. Assimilation constitutes one model of internal colonialism. Léopold de Saussure comments that this French doctrine also infiltrated the American Anglo-Saxon. Indeed, it was practised very effectively by that colony which had itself become a state, and which looked to enlightenment France for its political framework. What is now rather loosely called, and dismissed as, the ideology of the melting-pot, according to which all immigrants, wherever they come from and whatever their language, reconstruct their identities according to the American way of life in pursuit of the American dream, is nothing other than a home-spun version of the same assimilation model. Needless to say, this inclusiveness typically excluded those who were considered culturally too different, particularly native, African and Chinese Americans. U.S. Immigration laws, until Bobby Kennedy's revolutionary change of quota criteria in 1965, followed the same presuppositions.

This model of American identity is highly contested today by minority groups who wish to assert their

ethnic and racial cultural difference from the dominant culture, while at the same time arguing, in a sense paradoxically, that assimilation's promise of equality has not been made accessible to them. We want to be different where we are supposed to be the same, but we want the same where we feel we are different. It is often argued in postcolonial cultural writing, particularly emanating from India, that American postcolonialism has nothing really to do with the postcolonial, or the colonial, as such, and is really just about an identity politics which is of interest only to western audiences. However, what the two Saussurean models show is that US postcolonial cultural writing, far from being caught up in the seductions of postmodern western culture, doing its own thing in indifference to the very different conditions of the third world, is in fact not really even postcolonial, but caught up in contesting the basis of a state which operates according to a colonial theory of assimilation. This is why the issue of English as the language of instruction in state education remains so significant.

This is true of the UK also. As Léopold de Saussure and others pointed out, the British had no interest in the idea of colonial assimilation (this was a position reinforced by the experience of the loss of the American colonies). However, although it was never practised as a theory—nothing in Britain ever gets as dangerous as that—assimilation was practised in fact. Faced with the contiguous territories of Ireland, Wales and Scotland, the British state performed a succession of acts of Union, most notably in 1707 and in 1800, whereby the trio of Celtic nations were all translated constitutionally into parts of the same British state and integrated within it. The paradoxes that resulted, with the Scots, for example, as Linda Colley has shown, being assimilated so fast in

the eighteenth century that they began to run major portions of the British state, the army and increasingly the colonies, make for interesting complexities in the history of colonialism (Colley 1992). What we are seeing today at the political level of devolution, with a corresponding devolution back to individual nations regarded as relatively autonomous states overseen by the UK parliament, is in fact a reversion, paradoxically, to the fundamental precepts of British colonial policy, where colonies were run effectively as separate and fairly autonomous states, overseen by the Colonial or India office in London. It was on this basis that the claim for 'Home Rule' was first made in Ireland and in India. The final irony of this historical process is manifest in the slogan that has started appearing on walls and motorway bridges: 'Home Rule for England'.

Even though assimilation was never set up as a policy in Britain in the way it was in France, it remains the case that it is still assumed as the norm by much of the population. Objections to immigrants, for example, often centre on their apparent refusal to assimilate to the dominant culture. The colonial assimilation model remains dominant, but in contesting it with difference there is also a constant need to reassert its political values of sameness against the alternative German organic model of intrinsic, hierarchical difference—invoked typically by those who do not want assimilation at all, just to send immigrants 'home', which by implication is anywhere but here. This means that ethnic and other minorities in Britain who contest the uniformity of the state are in fact in the same position as those in the US who are grappling with the internal version of the colonial assimilation model. As too are all those in postcolonial states who are struggling against the results

of the assumption that a nation can only develop successfully through the processes of assimilation and the erasure of the differences of all minority cultures and their languages within it. To that degree there is much more of a correspondence between contemporary politics of activists in the north and the south, the west and the east, than is often claimed, and more of a rationale in bringing it all under the umbrella of a common term such as 'postcolonialism'. The paradox is that in challenging the model of assimilation for the nation, as a form of internal colonialism, minorities find themselves necessarily invoking a revised version of the same challenge issued by Léopold de Saussure, a hundred years ago, the object of which was the very opposite of their own political goals. To achieve that, it has been necessary to make a revision that extends Ferdinand's arguments about the nature of language into the realm of difference more generally, so that ethnicity can now be as ungrounded as language after Saussure. Saussure's arguments about language and ethnicity, however, are equally based on an assumption of ethnic and cultural uniformity that leads them back to the 'positive fact' of the communal bonds of the social—on which Saussure's logic ultimately depends even though his fundamental argument consists of the attempt to exclude it.

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