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Kant and Saussure

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1. Introduction

The aim of the present essay is to stage an intervention by Saussure in Kant's account of the formation and application of empirical concepts. This means at the same time trying out the limits of the claim, variously defended (ECO 1997; APEL 1972/1999; SENDEROWICZ and DASCAL: 1992/1997), that Kant was a linguistic philosopher, however inchoate we may take his semiotics to be.
Generally, defense of Kant as a linguistic philosopher takes one implicit thread of the first *Critique* to be the position that "there are no judgments without language" (BENNETT 1966: 87), and I defend a version of this position in light of a productive comparison of Kantian concept formation and Saussure's "language mechanism." Of course, that thread must be taken to be implicit: Kant himself makes scant mention of language in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, nor does he make clear, for example, to what extent we can or cannot assume a coextension of psychological and linguistic concepts; moreover it is not clear whether the dearth of explicit attention to language in the first *Critique* is the result of a purposeful eschewal on Kant's part or of the fact that the intimate link between language and thought was already an assumption in need of no mention. Nevertheless, Kant argues later, in the *Prolegomena*, that

[t]o search in our common knowledge for the concepts which do not rest upon particular experience and yet occur in all knowledge from experience, of which they as it were constitute the mere form of connection, presupposes neither greater reflection nor deeper insight than to detect in a language the rules of the actual use of words generally and thus to collect elements for a grammar. (*Prol.* Ak. IV 322–3)

Here we see the inkling of an equation of grammar with the transcendentalism that later grounds phenomenology (GIER 1981: 36).
My Saussurean reconstruction of Kant takes shape against this background, and centers on the assertion that, whereas for the latter the interplay of concept and intuition constitutes the achievement of cognition, it constitutes for the former the very condition of possibility of cognition, without at the same time being its completion. I conclude that Saussure's linguistic program yields a conceptual framework given in and as language, which framework must be reapplied to sensible manifolds in order to yield experience. Hence, with Senderowicz and Dascal, "it can hardly be claimed that . . . semiotics is " "'superfluous' in Kant's theory" (SENDEROWICZ and DASCAL 1997: 143); it is integral to it.

The argument has a number of practical upshots, especially in easing the tensions that stem from the undercooked account of empirical concepts in the first *Critique*. On the one hand it circumvents Kant's inadequate account of how some one representation rather than another results from the comparison of universal marks (and how those universal marks are discerned); on the other hand it clarifies the notion of a schema by assimilating it to the Saussurean understanding of 'value', which is an outgrowth not of some "art concealed in the depths of the human soul" (A141; B180–1) but of the language mechanism.

Of course, if my reading held only for empirical concepts it would underwhelm; answering to the structural exigencies of the Kantian program means operating not only at the level of empirical concepts, but at the level of categories as well. To that end the present essay defends explicitly the equation of rational and linguistic grammar to which the *Prolegomena* gestures and argues that the categories structuring experience are precisely the same categories that make language possible at all.

The present essay comprises three central components: In §2 I begin with a recountal of Saussurean linguistics with attention to certain motivations it shares with Kant; §3 rehearses the fundamentals of Kantian cognition to demonstrate the sense in which signs are underpinned by the same synthesis of form and content, in light of which §3.1 makes clear how signs function as formal rather than substantial entities; in §3.2 I give an account of empirical concept formation as governed by the acts that also govern the language mechanism, arguing (§3.3) that we must turn attention to the social nature of language and language learning; finally §4 shows how the preceding insights hold at the level of pure concepts or categories. I will not purport to have given an exhaustive account of a Saussurean Kant (or a Kantian Saussure); indeed I argue outright that further research into the import of time for both Kant and Saussure would be particularly valuable. Nevertheless I take seriously the repercussions of the claim I advance here: that the empirical concepts deployed in the act of thinking are already linguistic signs—a version, I take it, of Max Müller's now famous assertion, in paraphrase, that there can be no language without reason, no reason without language (MÜLLER 1865).

2. Arbitrariness and the Copernican Revolution in Language

Whereas it is the case that the arbitrariness of the sign has survived as the definitive principle of Saussurean linguistics, it is an unfortunate accident of the structure of the *Cours* that that principle, which has since been reduced to a kind of slogan, is insufficiently understood and its organizational force for Saussure's program underemphasized. That it is introduced as indubitable—even trivial—does little to correct these underemphases. Rehearsing the principle here therefore serves the purpose of critique.

There is no motivated, necessary, or inherent link between a signal and its signification. This is the so-called "first principle" of the nature of the linguistic sign. That it is the first principle is evidenced by the fact that the definitive schisms of the *Cours* (between *langue* and *parole*; synchrony and diachrony) follow from, rather than are coincident with the principle of arbitrariness, for the reason that the notion of arbitrariness applies not only to the link *between* signifiers and signifieds (i.e., it does not mean only that the connection of acoustic images to ideas is unmotivated), but it means also that signifiers and signifieds themselves are arbitrary, in the sense

that the conceptual and phonetic spectra are not carved up in advance. Concepts do not exist ready-made, such that a language must merely choose the desired sound pattern or acoustic image to express it, nor is that acoustic image formed merely through the novel concatenation of independently available sounds. This is borne out in the notion of linguistic value that is the subject matter of part 2, chapter 4 of the *Cours*. It is also the principle underlying the notion of the phoneme later elaborated by Jakobson (especially JAKOBSON 1971). Taken together, these result in an emphasis on differential value rather than positive content and they require both (1) the division of the underlying system (*langue*) from the concrete manifestation of that system (*parole*) and (2) the division of the state of a system at any given time (synchrony) from the contingent and externally provoked alterations to that system over time (diachrony).

The wholly arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign does not preclude that signifier and signified are radically interdependent; it requires it. For while it is a methodological necessity that concept and sound pattern be isolable in principle (in the sense that we must be able to speak of them as 'halves' of a "unified duality"), they are inseparable in reality: Discussion of concepts alone belongs to psychology, of sound patterns alone to phonetics. But languages are systems of signs, and that there are signs at all depends first upon the synthesis of signifiers and signifieds. To borrow a formulation: Concepts without sound patterns are mute; sound patterns without concepts are noise. Thus, just as there is, for Kant, no cognition without the cooperation of concepts and intuitions, in Saussure, there is no language without the cooperation of concepts and sound patterns.

We know well that the cooperation in question for Kant holds schemata to affect some homogeneity between the sensible intuition and the concept applied to it, or else rests upon a fundamental homogeneity already between the concept of an object and its intuitive fulfillment; in Saussure, if we are permitted to stress the point once more, the heterogeneity of the concept and the sound pattern is so fundamental as to constitute a "first principle." Nevertheless, the invocation of Kant is not accidental. The principle of arbitrariness is not a principle defining the arbitrary nature of the relationship between a sign and some thing in the world (some referent), which the casual language user may assume is what the sign 'means'; thus Saussure's first move toward overcoming the mistaken conception of language as a nomenclature is to isolate the linguistic entity, and consequently the language process, from the world "in itself." Language is a hermetically sealed system of the Kantian sort: Kantian in the sense that the sealing off of the world in itself in favor of attention to purely psychological processes constitutes a foundational move of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

This foundational move followed from a worry Kant articulates in his Letter to Marcus Herz of February 21, 1772, following the publication of Kant's *Inaugural Dissertation* in 1770:

> I noticed that I still lacked something essential, something that in my long metaphysical studies, I, as well as others had failed to pay attention to and that, in fact, constitutes the key to the whole secret of hitherto still obscure metaphysics. I asked myself: What is the ground of the relation of that in us which we call "representation" to the object? (LETTER TO HERZ, Ak. X, 130; 71)

The question of ground arose because, at the time of his *Dissertation*, Kant's epistemological position was nested in a causal theory of perception, in which human

sensations were understood to be representations of the sense data produced by objects, hence empirical concepts arose in logical conformity with the objects in the world they were understood to pick out. Kant later recognized this position was problematic if he meant to maintain the existence of pure *a priori* concepts. Pure concepts, underived from the world by definition, cannot logically be in conformity with the world if the source of the conformity of concepts with objects is the affectation of the senses by the object. Kant's solution was a move away from the vocabulary of causal impingements toward talk of the conditions of possibility, either of representations by objects or of objects by representations. Longuenesse notes that "this shift from causality to conditions of possibility is only a manifestation of a more fundamental shift: Kant is no longer examining the relation of two heterogeneous elements (one "within" and the other "outside' representation), but the relation of two elements both internal to representation" (LONGUENESSE 1998: 20). Thought, in other words, no longer touches the world as it is in itself, but instead as it appears.

One famous and well-rehearsed consequence of Kant's new transcendental idealism is the realization that, rather than thought conforming to the world *as it is*, the world *in so far as I can understand it* conforms to the forms of thought. The oft trivialized notion of the arbitrariness of the sign inaugurates a Copernican revolution of the same ilk (see HARRIS and TAYLOR 1989): First, the rejection of the Adamic portrait of language as a table of terms for things results in the principle by which concepts are formed (in the sense of delimited) through involvement in a novel linguistic unit, thus it results also in the more significant position that the conceptual framework for cognition of the world is linguistically produced. As Roy Harris describes in his introduction to the *Cours*:

> Words are not vocal labels which have come to be attached to things and qualities already given in advance by Nature, or to ideas already grasped independently by the human mind. On the contrary languages themselves, collective products of social interaction, supply the essential conceptual frameworks for men's analysis of reality and, simultaneously, the verbal equipment for their description of it. The concepts we use are creations of the language we speak. (Harris 1986: ix)

In other words, a linguistic theory founded on the principle of arbitrariness *in the strong sense* generates an account of cognition as linguistically structured, so that we find ourselves in possession of a linguistic idealism much like that espoused by Herder and Humboldt: the world conforms not to thought, but to the forms of language. Nevertheless the Kantian roots of Saussure's program demonstrate how that idealism escapes the more pernicious consequences of the charge of linguistic relativism. In turn Saussure helps to make explicit the sense in which the Kantian program can already been understood as linguistic, giving weight to the thought, as expressed by Eco, that Kant assumed implicitly "a very close nexus of language and thought." This nexus, we shall see, "presents itself precisely in the doctrine of the schematism, so much so as to suggest that the schema [is] a concept-word (*Wortbegriff*)" (Eco 1997: 66).

3. Kant and Saussure

Kantian cognition—as is familiar—is constituted by modes of concept and intuition, the former standing for the indirect representation of objects through the understanding and the latter for the direct representation of objects through the faculty of sensibility. Broadly, Saussure maintains this Kantian structure in general, insofar as a sign is a structure involving the cooperation of some form and some (material, sensory) content. However, narrowly, whereas that structure means for Kant the subsumption of an intuition under a concept resulting in experience, for Saussure it means the synthesis of a concept and a sound pattern resulting in a sign. This, I submit, makes cognition possible because it gives form to the "amorphousness of thought" without yet intervening in thinking; signs constitute the means for the indirect representation of objects—indirect, because those objects are not their meanings.

My argument in what follows is that, whereas the interplay of a concept and some material (but not physical) element, such as an intuition, constitutes for Kant the achievement of cognition, for Saussure, where the latter element is an acoustic image, it constitutes its condition of possibility, although not its completion. Saussure's linguistic program yields a conceptual framework given in and as language—a conceptual framework that must be applied *again* to *sensible* manifolds in order to yield experience.

The argument has a number of steps. First, I demonstrate with Saussure how the units of a linguistic system can be syntheses of form and material and at the same time 'merely' formal products having differential value but not positive content; it is only under these conditions that a Saussurean sign could function as a Kantian concept, determinable by involvement in an act of thinking—a concept that, without an intuition, is "empty." Second, as my aim is to accomplish the task at hand in such a way that we are not lead to violate the principle of arbitrariness, I demonstrate that the critical Kantian notion of the homogeneity between empirical concepts and the intuitions subsumed under them need not be coincident with the claim that signs themselves are motivated. To that end, I will have to rescue an account of empirical concept formation that holds schemata of empirical concepts to be subject-constituted, rather than abstracted from experience. This will include the claim that the resources on which the Kantian subject is said to draw for the formation and determination of empirical concepts are already at the disposal of the Saussurean language user as what enables her to communicate in and understand her own language. Finally, if we are to believe, in the wake of the preceding arguments, that a Saussurean semiotic system logically precedes any fulfilled act of thinking, it will be necessary to demonstrate that the categories ultimately structuring Kantian cognition are implicit in Saussure, where they function as categories of grammar.

3.1 Language as a Formal System of Signs

A sign is the synthesis of a concept and a sound pattern. This much is familiar, certainly, but it is also misleading, as it may be taken to license two mistaken conclusions: (1) that sound patterns are identical to spoken linguistic sequences; and (2) that concepts constitute ideas that it is the task of sound patterns to express. Saussure is straightforward in his argument against the former: "The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given him by the evidence of his senses" (SAUSSURE 1986: 98). But the latter is the more pernicious error, insofar as

it represents what we might call the naïve conception of a language as the vehicle of pre-formed ideas and is, moreover, antithetical to Saussure's first principle. Against that error, as I outlined briefly, the linguist is insistent that "in itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure" (SAUSSURE 1986: 155). Thus, although sound lies outside this "nebulousness of thought," it is essential for the introduction of distinctness within it, for the reason that, and here we see Saussure's most explicit rejection of the naïve conception of language:

[t]he characteristic role of a language in relation to thought is not to supply the material phonetic means by which ideas may be expressed. It is to act as intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both necessarily produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, is made precise by this process of segmentations. (SAUSSURE 1986: 156)

Although certainly there would be some terminological disagreement between Kant and Saussure, especially on the question of what is called thinking, this is a disagreement we will have, for the present, to put aside. Presently at issue is the question of the ontological status of the linguistic unit, for if a sign is to constitute the conceptual mode of Kantian thinking, it will have to be a *formal* rather than a *substantial* entity.
Saussure is helpfully direct on this point. "If words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance," he writes (and he has been insistent that they do not):

one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case. French uses the same verb *louer* both for granting and taking a lease, whereas German has two separate verbs, *mieten* and *vermeiten*: so there is no exact correspondence between the values in question. (SAUSSURE 1986: 161)

The notion of value included here is what allows us to recognize the purely formal nature of a linguistic system. Values are not coextensive with meanings (which might be more appropriately associated with m
ental content), but they are determined by a language's limning of conceptual scopes. Even though signs are syntheses of conceptual and material elements, *both* are differentially, rather than positively valued. Thus it is the case that

instead of *ideas* given in advance, [there] are *values* emanating from a linguistic system. If we say these values correspond to certain concepts, it must be understood that the concepts in question are purely differential. That is to say they are concepts defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterizes each most exactly is being whatever the others are not. (SAUSSURE 1986: 162)

So too with sound patterns: the fact is a fundamental principle of phonology.
Certainly this formality does not preclude that language achieves a kind of substantiality when exercised in speech—for this is when the material is made physical. But the distinction between the formal and physical is precisely a

distinction the *Cours* takes pains to maintain. It is also a distinction that holds *parole* at only a near structural remove from what is called, in Kant, an empirical intuition.

3.2 Kant and Saussure on Empirical Concepts

It is familiar that Kant distinguishes empirical from pure concepts or categories, the former of which are drawn from the sensible given and whose formation is of concern only if we move beyond the immediate scope of the first *Critique*. Pure concepts, however, are the *a priori* conditions of possibility of objects of experience at all. If Saussure is made to intervene in the Kantian account of cognition, our portrait of the language user and her language mechanism must operate at both the pure and the empirical level, and in a way that is illuminating. Operation at the level of pure concepts will mean that the categories yielding experience for Kant underpin language in Saussure's program. Investigation of that underpinning is the subject of §4. Operation at the level of empirical concepts, however, is more complex and is of capital import for our purposes here.

Kant argues that empirical concepts are generated from the sensible given, which generation involves the intervention of acts of the understanding such as comparison. While it is not my aim to argue that this process *in toto* requires a Saussurean program, I will demonstrate that the same acts of the understanding govern the language mechanism as supposedly govern the generation of empirical concepts. My argument is that empirical concepts as Kant understands them must already be Saussurean signs, hence psychological-linguistic units consisting of the synthesis of idea and acoustic image. I am therefore urging a claim in tension with some of Kant's discussions of concept formation, which recommend implicitly a version of the naïve conception of language. For if the formation of empirical concepts comes in advance of, rather than is coincident with the ascription of sound patterns, then it is not necessary to speak of language at all when we speak of concept formation, and no account of human thinking need make explicit reference to what is linguistic; these are the circumstances we find in Kant.[1] Nevertheless it is necessary to turn to those discussions in order to determine if a Saussurean intervention is possible.

In his *Logic*, Kant describes the formation of empirical concepts in the following terms:

> The logical acts of the understanding by which concepts are generated as to their form are: (1) *comparison*, i.e., the likening of mental images to one another in relation to the unity of consciousness; (2) *reflection*, i.e., the going back over different mental images, how they can be comprehended in one consciousness; and finally (3.) *abstraction* or the segregation of everything else by which the mental images differ . . . [T]hese three logical operations of the understanding are essential and general conditions of generating any concept whatever. For example, I see a fir, a willow, and a linden. In firstly comparing these objects, I notice that they are different from one another in respect of trunk, branches, leaves, and the like; further, however, I reflect only on what they have in common, the trunk, the branches, the leaves themselves, and abstract from their size, shape, and so forth; thus I gain a concept of a tree. (*Logik* §6, Ak. IX, 94–5, 592)

[1] Although, for an important argument to the contrary, see Senderowicz and Dascal 1990/1992.

In the case just outlined, Kant gives an account of how we could determine in principle that the fir and the willow belong to some higher-order concept 'tree', but he gives no account of how I understand that it is 'treeness' I am looking for, hence how my intuition is *of* a tree, rather than merely of some other commonality between separate intuitions, neither of which intuition *contains* 'treeness'. Instead I must somehow *construct* 'treeness' on the basis of that commonality. But how to distinguish that particular commonality from other features or sets of features the trees in question share? How to hold that commonality as the governing concept? Longuenesse has argued that attention to the peculiar structure of "universalizing" as opposed to "aesthetic" comparison reveals the problem as already circumvented, on the basis of the observation that "only insofar as comparison is conjoined with [rather than is logically and temporally prior to] the two other operations [reflection and abstraction] can it be geared from the outset toward universal representation, that is, the production of a concept" (LONGUENESSE 1998: 116) She explains that, whereas "*aesthetic* comparison is a comparison of intuitions—that is, singular representations, with respect to their spatiotemporal situations[,] *universalizing* comparison is a comparison of universal marks *which are generated by the very act of comparison*." (ibid.). She holds that 'arboreity' as the common mark emerges as a mark at all only through the process of a universalizing comparison. But it is not clear that her clarification avoids the problem at all. When Kant explains that, "for example, one sees a sapling, *so* one has the representation of a tree," the "so" is still substantially underexplained.

The first *Critique* lacks an account of how I perceive the tree *qua* 'tree', because it, like the *Logic*, presents a problematically simple abstractionist portrait of concept formation. It is because Kant is interested principally in the question of how a perception—or how an intuitively determined concept—can be made subject to the categories in a judgment of experience that his discussion of the formation of empirical concepts is inchoate. It is not until the *Critique of Judgment* that we can recognize the role of reflective judgment in the formation of empirical concepts. But that is too far afield. Nevertheless Kant does get us some of the way in his first *Critique*. We can begin to account for the gap just indicated if we turn to the chapter on the Schematism, where relevant for our purposes is not the discussion of schemata for the connection of otherwise heterogeneous categories and intuitions, but of schemata for empirical concepts. This is admittedly precarious terrain, for Kant seems indecisive on the question of how empirical concepts are related to schemata, which agnosticism stems from the fact that the first *Critique* deals expressly with *a priori* conditions. However his account is rich with examples of the empirical sort; thus, while the Schematism chapter clarifies to a certain degree the role empirical concepts might play in determinative thinking, it also highlights an impasse through which Saussure may be able to grant passage.

Making the task more difficult, in his discussion of the schematism, Kant vacillates between an account of the schemata of pure sensuous concepts (e.g., triangle) and examples of schemata for properly empirical concepts (e.g., dog). That vacillation is problematic: schemata—understood as procedures for the construction of images of concepts facilitating the recognition in appearances of instances of those concepts—could be satisfactory with respect to empirical concepts of the latter sort only if (a) they get us close enough to the specificity of our appearances and (b) they come in advance of the image of the object as what allows us to construct it. The problem of (a) reveals the inadequacy of Kant's suggestion that "[t]he concept 'dog' signifies a rule according to which my imagination can delineate the figure of a four-footed

animal in a general manner" (A141), which does little to differentiate dogs from other quadrupeds, even in principle. Kant must mean that the schema of 'dog' begins as a set of rules for the broadest distinction (e.g., of quadrupeds from bipeds), but that it is capable of further specificity *ad infinitum* (in order that we can distinguish, in the end, dogs from other quadrupeds)—that it functions, in Eco's characterization, as a "structural diagram [applied to] the manifold of sensation" (ECO 1997: 86); the question remains where the broad and initial distinction comes from if it does not come from some essential notion of what, at a minimum, specifies a dog. This latter is crucial, for it suggests that either the human intellect is equipped in advance with some essential notion of every specifiable empirical concept, or at least with the schemata for a minimum set of distinctions (e.g., to produce 'dog' but not yet 'terrier' or 'retriever')—a decidedly unKantian position bottoming out, perhaps, in Fodorian representationalism; or schemata of empirical concepts are *themselves* formed *a posteriori* and *out of experience*, in which case we have hardly moved beyond the empiricism Kant means to complicate and refute, and have in any case found ourselves in the paradoxical position that schemata must be abstracted from a sensible manifold that is only made thinkable through the application of concepts.

We have found ourselves, then, in the following position: We can no longer be satisfied with the claim that concepts are abstracted from the sensible given, but it cannot be the case either that schemata for their determination in an encounter with the sensible are innate, full stop. Nevertheless, we must preserve some version of the claim that the sensible manifold is somehow 'carved up' by the application of concepts, for if it were divided into perceptibly discrete entities in advance of the imposition of thinking then perceptual judgments would be a matter of mere receptivity. It must be the case that schemata of empirical concepts are subject-*constructed* outside of experience rather than *drawn from* or *discovered* in perceptions—hence that empirical concepts are not abstracted from some given but come from elsewhere—and the mechanism of that construction must be traceable to innate principles, even if they do not reduce to them.

The task is to try out a Saussurean intervention in that position (but see also SENDEROWICZ and DASCAL 1997), for if the formation of linguistic signs imposes form on thought in advance of that form's being determined by some intuition, then we have not run far afield of the Kantian account, but we have gained a way out of the otherwise circular problematic of how the sensible manifold can be the source of our empirical concepts and at the same an indistinct sensible mass before their imposition. Our exit is the observation that Saussure's account holds concepts to be learned in the form of signs, rather than abstracted. Their acquisition through learning inserts them into a system governed by the intellectual capacities Kant has already remarked make the discovery of concepts in perception possible. Hence, Saussure can be taken to suggest, concepts are not drawn from experience, but recognized there, because speech and reason are governed by a single organizing structure—a *logos* (HARRIS and TAYLOR 1989: 177).

Saussure insists concepts do not exist in advance of their involvement in a linguistic duality. It accomplishes little, therefore, to ask from where concepts (*qua* ideas or signifieds) are acquired. We can investigate ideas independently of their involvement in a sign, but only with the caveats that (a) such an 'entity' has been reduced to a total abstraction that is properly the subject matter of psychology, and (b) we would in any event have to presuppose the association of that idea with some acoustic image, otherwise it would not be available for our consideration at all, not even as an

abstraction. Hence the question of the ultimate origin of concepts in Saussure is effectively a question about language.

The question has two distinct parts. First, we must consider the social nature of language, insofar as sign systems are socially introduced and socially preserved. Second, we must consider the language faculty itself, whereby signs are inserted into a functional system that confers value on them and in virtue of which linguistic units and sequences are comprehensible. These are not so readily separable. As Saussure admits: "The structure of a language is a social product of our language faculty. At the same time, it is also a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty. . . . [Language] belongs both to the individual and to society" (SAUSSURE 1986: 25). If we were to attempt the separation, however, we could say that the former aspect—the social aspect—is necessary for the introduction of novel signs and, by providing the relevant normative context, for preserving the state of a language at any given time, but it is useless in absence of the existence in any individual of the relevant capacities for using and evaluating those signs. Those capacities, we shall see, include the existence of certain *a priori* concepts that are called categories of the understanding in Kant and of grammar in Saussure, as well as include a faculty for the construction and comparison of images, called imagination in Kant or the language mechanism in Saussure.

3.2.1 The Social Nature of Language

The social aspect of language is distinct from the institutional or historical influence on languages over time. This is hardly to deny the influence of such factors on the structure or development of a language. Nevertheless at issue is the internal formal structure of language, which is socially preserved, but which pays no mind to the source of the forces effecting change. Indeed, at issue is not change at all, because at issue is language removed, to the extent that this is both possible and practically desirable, from any temporal context.

This said, at any synchronic state, a language is made up of signs consisting of ideas designated by signals, which designation determines the bounds of that idea. This designation "eludes the will of the individual," insofar as—and Wittgenstein has made the point more familiarly—any language made up of individually chosen signals would be a barrier against rather than a tool for communication (WITTGENSTEIN 1967: §243). Without some shared network of available signs, a community has no means in common by which to communicate. Nevertheless, the association of signifiers and signifieds is not up to the community, either. Practically speaking, rules of meaning and use are imposed rather than chosen. This is attested even by the trivial fact that languages are not created anew at successive generations, but are inherited, which inheritance spans as far back into human history as human history knows to reach. Thus, Saussure assures us, the question of the ultimate origin of language is as uninteresting as it is impossible to answer; from a practical perspective, the full analysis of language is an analysis of a network of signs that *already exists*, hence that is, to reiterate a formulation I have already tried out, socially *preserved*, rather than socially *instituted.*

One consequence is that language is a quasi-paradoxical institution, insofar as is arbitrary, hence open radically to change, yet socially preserved, hence preserved in a certain consistent form. "It is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no

other law than that of tradition," Saussure writes, "and because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary" (SAUSSURE 1986: 108). Language, we could say, is a complex system deposited in the individual through the social inheritance of a tradition.

Under these conditions, the question of concept formation in the epistemological sense is rendered an abstraction that ceases to be particularly illuminating. More relevant is how concepts are *learned* so that they may be *applied*, for concepts can no longer be understood as individual intellectual achievements in the form of abstractions from sensible manifolds, but rather as externally imposed, learned rules for the division of the otherwise continuous spectrum of thought. Admitting this, it is nonsensical to ask how they are drawn from the given. To do so would be first of all to assume that concepts can exist in the form of ideas independently of and antecedent to the imposition by sound of form on thought and second of all to assume that the acquisition of concepts is a case of some self-motivated naïve consciousness reflecting upon the input of sensibility, not a case of inheritance from tradition, which latter holds that successive generations, indeed successive individuals, do not *create* empirical concepts anew, but *reproduce* them.

In order to understand how concepts are learned, we must return to the insight of §3.1 of this essay, which reminded us of the differential character of the linguistic sign. For learning a concept is not a process of granting content, but a process of exclusion: To borrow an example from Jonathan Culler, suppose we mean to teach a pupil the color brown. We cannot presume that a mere ostensive teaching will result in an adequate grip on the meaning of 'brown', for no amount of pointing to brown objects will suffice unless the color of those objects is distinguished from other colors in such a way that draws clear boundaries around the concept 'brown'—that limits its scope. Culler remarks: "[our pupil] will not be able to pass our [color] test until we have taught him to distinguish brown and red, brown and tan, brown and gray, brown and yellow, brown and black. It is only when he has grasped the relation between brown and other colors that he will begin to understand what brown is" (CULLER 1986: 35). Thus even if we have met the minimal Wittgensteinian position of having been initiated into the appropriate language game, the ostensive teaching of words falls short except when understood through differentiation. This is not to say that the concept 'brown' depends merely upon possession of other color concepts, but that it depends moreover on their relation. "The reason for this is that 'brown' is not an independent concept defined by some essential properties but one term in a system of color terms, defined by its relations with the other terms which delimit it" (ibid.). The empirical concept 'brown' has a differential value.

We can identify a similar story in Kant's account in the *Logic* of a "savage" apprehending a house, for which he has no concept (*Logik*, introd. VIII, Ak. IX, 64–65, 569). In Longuenesse' description of the encounter, the savage lacks "[the] rule guiding him to privilege certain marks and leave others aside, so that a concept of house might apply." As a result,

> Should someone point to the object and call it 'house', this might suggest to him a proper name for the singular object he has in front of him, but even this is uncertain: how is he to know what is being referred to—the door, the color, the shape, the site, or what? Only the "application in a comparison," that is, the gradually dawning consciousness of a "rule of apprehension" common to the representation of various objects serving the same purpose, would pick out analogous marks and bring forth the concept of a house (LONGUENESSE 1998: 118).

In other words, the subject can deploy a concept (here: "house") and recognize an instance of it only on the condition that he can mark outs its significant differentiations from other concepts and therein insert it into the system of his language within which that concept has relational value.

3.2.2 The Language Mechanism

I have been urging that the concepts at work in language are not formed by individual reflection or abstraction from sensible phenomena—concepts are not Lockean ideas—, but are psychological entities carved out against the background of a process of comparison, reflection, and abstraction that constitutes the language mechanism itself and that confers value upon those concepts by inserting them into a formal system and constituting them in terms of *difference*. The mechanism for understanding a sign thus parallels the process for learning it. To illustrate that mechanism, let us look at an example from the *Cours*.
On the one hand the spoken sequence *défaire* is easily representable. It has a particular sound pattern evoking a particular idea and it is available to any speaker of the French language who has been adequately initiated. Yet understanding that word means at the same time understanding that it is a phonetically and semantically analyzable sequence. For instance, upon any instancing of *défaire* we are primed with the set of words in the language utilizing the negative prefix "dé" (*décoller*, *déplacer*, *découdre*, etc.) and the set of words utilizing, perhaps in combination with other affixes, *faire* (*faire*, *refaire*, *contrefaire*, etc.) (C 178). Indeed it is only because the word *défaire* is

surrounded by these other forms that [it is] . . . analyzable into smaller units—that [it is a] syntagma . . . . *Défaire* would become unanalyzable if the other words containing *dé-* or *faire* disappeared from the language. *Défaire* would then be one simple unit, with no parts to contrast internally. (SAUSSURE 1986: 178–9)

It is becoming clear in what sense the preceding example involves the capacities assigned by Kant for the generation of empirical concepts through the activity of the understanding: The *comparison* of syntagmatic units is a comparison of co-present units of a sequence in service of determining their interdependence; the *association* of paradigmatic relations is a mental association based upon a felt homogeneity of otherwise distinct units—on the side of the concept, on the side of acoustic image, or both; and determination of syntagmatic or paradigmatic relations requires the *abstraction* of the units of the system that have been granted morphological value. But we are not in the position, note, where abstraction yields the circular problematic we encountered in the Schematism, because knowledge of what elements are granted morphological value is learned and the determination of value is in any wise arbitrary.
I submit that this process is mirrored in perception, where it is in virtue of the system governed by the language mechanism that the language user has the tools to isolate shared from unshared elements in the comparison of perceptions. Because language gives form to thought, differential elements of objects in the world only register as relevantly differential if they constitute the conceptual half of some unified duality granted its value in the language system by being differentially related. Indeed this is

precisely the case in the example of Kant's "savage." The process of empirical concept formation in the sense outlined in the *Logic* must be grounded in a prior process of sign formation, which cleaves, e.g., trunk from branch as differential elements in the system—a difference that is registered in and by the language rather than demanded by some facts about the world— so that each element might then function as determining a comparable intuition in the Kantian process. The process of concept formation outlined in Kant, where the comparison and distinction of simple elements (leaf, trunk, branch) aids in the formation of higher-level concepts (tree), does not have as its foundation some pre-determined set of differentiations (some naturally determined base-level nuance for the morphology of dendriforms), but rather an arbitrary, revisable system of interdependent signs, the comparison of which requires the same logical acts of the understanding and the learning of which requires a process of differentiation of the kind outlined above. The Saussurean language mechanism produces empirical concepts in the Kantian sense. Kantian empirical concepts are not 'ideas', but signs.
Indeed the description of the language mechanism "in action" looks suspiciously like the account of concept formation I have been urging Kant towards. Saussure writes:

Our memory holds in store all the various complex forms of a syntagma, of every kind and length. When a syntagma is brought into use, we call upon associative groups in order to make our choice. So when someone says *marchons!*, he thinks unconsciously of various associative groups, at whose common intersection appears the syntagma *marchons!* This syntagma belongs to one series which includes the singular imperative *marches!* and the 2nd person plural imperative *marches!*, and *marchons!* stands in opposition to both as a form selected from this group. At the same time, it belongs to another series which includes *montons!*, *mangeons!*, etc., and represents a selection from this groups as well. (SAUSSURE 1986: 179)

Thus I determine the sign to be used according to a system of value that can be recognized in experience but is not abstracted from it. *Marches* and *Marchez* register as different signs because they have been granted different value, not because that difference in value 'exists' in itself for me to discover. For this reason it is precisely against the background of the process just described that the naïve conception of language use is fully revealed as naïve, for it is clearly over-simple to claim that *marchons* is the best or most adequate means for the expression of an idea. To the contrary,

the idea evokes not just one form but a whole latent system, through which the oppositions involved in the institution of that sign are made available. The sign by itself would have no meaning of its own. If the forms *marche!* and *marches!* were to disappear from the language, leaving *marchons!* in isolation, certain oppositions would automatically collapse and *ipso facto* the value of *marchons!* would be different. *(Ibid.)*

This is easily illustrated with English, where the opposition of formal and informal second person terms does not exist—nor the opposition between singular and plural second person terms—, hence the value of English "you" is shared out between *tu* and *vous* in French. I, as an English speaker, do not recognize this distinction when I speak, because it is, in the full sense of the word, insignificant.

The examples recall the difference between meaning and value. Certainly "you," "tu," and "vous" *mean* the same thing, in the sense that they conjure the same mental image (they have the same psychological referent), but they do not have the same *value*, which means that they cannot pick out the same thing in the same aspect. If we return, for instance, to another of Saussure's oft repeated examples, English "sheep" and French "mouton" share a signified, in the sense that the signifiers, which differ, conjure the mental image of a same quadruped ruminant mammal. But their values differ. The image of sheep's meat on a table requires a change of signifier in English (to "mutton"), but not in French. This observation is significant for our investigation of Kant, because it illustrates a peculiarity of empirical concepts: Any empirical concept (in the Kantian sense) is limited in its sensible application by a schema, which draws the rules for that application. Hence schemata might be understood to register *value*: they fix the limits for the application of a concept. This reading finds support again in Eco, who argues that while "we might say that the schema of the empirical concept comes to coincide with the concept of the object," it is more accurate to say that there is a kind of "trinity" around the schema, "whose three 'persons' are . . . *schema*, *concept*, and *meaning*" (ECO 1997: 86). The "trinity" should by now be familiar, and the example of linguistic difference thus illustrates *why* schemata must be understood as constructed rather than abstracted. Rules for sensibly limiting the applications of concepts cannot be drawn from appearances of nature, for those rules vary cross-linguistically, and nature does not speak.

4. Categories

I have been stressing that, if the Saussurean intervention so far attempted is to succeed, it will have to be convincing "all the way down." Thus it remains to be demonstrated that the Kantian categories that ultimately structure all of experience are the same categories structuring language; if the categories are to make the objects of experience possible at all (rather than conforming to them), and if we are to argue that linguistic signs constitute the conceptual mode of the cognition of objects, then we will have to demonstrate that the categories underpin these linguistic signs as well.

We can thank Benveniste for a shortcut to the present issue (BENVENISTE 1958). Although Benveniste's target was Aristotle's *Categories*, of which Kant was reservedly admiring, I want to suggest that Benveniste's objection stands on some revision. The categories, in Kant as in Aristotle, are grammatical. Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Modality are the broadest categories of grammar governing the fundamental distinctions of mood, tense, number, person, and class (noun, adjective, etc.). Which means that the table of the categories is made up of the most abstract, but also the minimum set of distinctions necessary for a linguistic system of the Saussurean kind.

Benveniste was critical of Aristotle's Grecocentrism with respect to his *Categories*, but the point stands newly significant if we can accept that it need not result in wholesale linguistic relativism. Kant's pared down categories represent, in other words, foundational cross-linguistic grammatical categories. We have not lost grip on the objectivity of thought achieved by the imposition of the categories, for they are universal (they do not just hold for particular languages). We have simply gained traction for the position that Kantian conceptuality is linguistic, and it is precisely this view that finds support in Kant's remarks of the *Prolegomena* quoted above (JANIK and TOULMIN 1996: 121)

In fact instances of the application of the categories parallel precisely instances of their application in the construction of utterances. Let's turn by way of example to Kant's analysis of an "event":

I see a ship move down stream. My perception of its lower position follows upon the perception of its position higher up in the stream, and it is impossible that in the apprehension of this appearance the ship should first be perceived lower down in the stream and afterwards higher up. The order in which the perceptions succeed on another in apprehension is in this instance determined, and to this order apprehension is bound down. . . . In the perception of an event [such as this] there is always a rule that makes the order in which the perceptions . . . follow upon one another a *necessary* order. (B237–8).

The example describes precisely the condition of syntagmas, which cannot be understood *qua* syntagmas absent their appearance in a certain order. It is characteristic of the peculiar interdependency of syntagmatic relations that units achieve an actually meaningful status only when the requirements of order and combination are met. Signs, in order to be meaningful, are subject not only to conditions of socially preserved meaning but also to conditions of the categories. The categories hold not only to render perceptions experiences, but to make language possible at all.

5. Conclusion

The preceding discussion has been brief, and I would like to conclude by highlighting what has been gained. But first I must gesture at one point at which the intervention might be further pursued, and to greater ends. I have suggested, for instance, that the position of absolute synchronicity in language is a methodological fiction, and indeed it is clear with little investigating that the background condition of all of the linguistic functions at issue here, and importantly also the fundamental form for Kant, is *time*. To tease out the extent or reach of this fact, however, would require much more elaboration. Nevertheless we can be content that Saussure himself insisted that any adequate account of the "reality" of language must include time as a factor. This is not yet to touch upon the infusion of temporal elements into grammatical categories such as tense or aspect. That, as I have said, is a project for another day.

Nevertheless, the present essay has advanced us some of the way toward recognizing the structural affinities of the Kantian and Saussurean programs and toward trying out the intervention of one in the other. One version of that trial has been my claim that any given language bears the structure of Kantian cognition. Which is to say that it consists of a purely formal underlying system (*langue*), capable in practice of being materially realized (*parole*). The latter is a physical manifestation that would be mere noise, except in accord with a system. The former is a structure that is mute until physically rendered. But I have also described how the language mechanism links acoustic images with psychological concepts and inserts the resultant signs into a network, and I have suggested that this renders them capable of functioning in the conceptual mode of (Kantian) cognition. This latter constitutes the stronger version of my claim: that the empirical concepts deployed in an act of thinking are already linguistic signs. That claim suggests that thinking is a dialectical process linking

formal with sensible or material contents, first in the formation of empirical concept-signs and second in the determination of those concepts by intuitions. It also suggests that each moment of this process is governed by a set of categories that are grammatical as well as epistemological, and the universal *a prioricity* of which reigns in the otherwise unchecked relativism that might result from any other system in which language is held to determine thought. Saussure preserves and at the same time rescues that famous dictum, espoused by Humboldt, that "language is the formative organ of thought."

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