

## Ferdinand de Saussure on the Affinities Between Economics and Semiotics

Winfried Nöth

Volume 40, numéro 2-3, 2020

Économie & Sémiotique I  
Economics & Semiotics I

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098860ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098860ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de sémiotique / Canadian Semiotic Association

ISSN

0229-8651 (imprimé)  
1923-9920 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nöth, W. (2020). Ferdinand de Saussure on the Affinities Between Economics and Semiotics. *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 40(2-3), 33–55. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1098860ar>

Résumé de l'article

À partir des manuscrits du *Cours de linguistique générale*, l'article reconstruit les réflexions de Saussure sur la question des affinités et des différences entre la linguistique et l'économie, en particulier, son modèle des marchandises comme signes et éléments du système économique, analogue au signe verbal comme et unité de base du système linguistique. Les notions-clés de cette étude sont le caractère arbitraire du signifiant par rapport au signifié, les associations syntagmatiques et paradigmatiques des signes, la valeur positive par rapport à la valeur négative, type et token, substance et forme. L'article étudie comment H. Lefebvre, J. Baudrillard, Rossi-Landi, et les anthropologues culturels M. Sahlins, M. Douglas et B. Isherwood appliquent des éléments de ce modèle dans leurs analyses des biens et des marchandises. Il affirme que Saussure propose une faible analogie et qu'une de ses faiblesses est la comparaison au niveau du mot plutôt qu'au niveau d'une proposition ou d'un argument. Il conclut en affirmant que les analogies de Saussure ont néanmoins une grande valeur heuristique pour la sémiotique culturelle.

# Ferdinand de Saussure on the Affinities Between Economics and Semiotics

Winfried Nöth<sup>1</sup>

Catholic University of São Paulo

## Preliminaries

This paper is about semiotic perspectives on economics in the more abstract sense of “political economy”, as it was called in Saussure’s time and is occasionally still called today (Irvine 1989). It is restricted to the semiotic perspectives on economics in the writings of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). How did the founding father of structuralist semiotics see the relationship between semiotics and economics? How have his ideas influenced later semiotic approaches to economics?

The ideas concerning the affinities between economics and semiotics that Saussure discussed in his *Course of General Linguistics* are only few, but together with his proposal for a general “science that studies the life of signs within society” (Saussure 1916b : 16), they had an enormous influence on socio-semiotic thought since the 1970s (e.g., Latouche 1973; Rossi-Landi 1975; Ponzio 1993; Kockelman 2006; and elsewhere, this issue). However, in its standard edition of 1916, the *Course* gives only a fragmentary account of Saussure’s ideas concerning the affinities between semiotics and economics. The purpose of this paper is to complement these fragments by recourse to some supplementary sources that have so far received little or no scholarly attention, and to consider them in a broader context.

To this end, the following six sources have been consulted and compared : (1) the *Course* in its “classical” edition by Bally and Sechehaye (3rd ed. of 1931), quoted as “1916a”, (2) Baskin’s English translation of 1959, quoted as “1916b”, (3) Engler’s critical edition of 1967-1968, quoted as “1967/68”, (4) Komatsu and Wolf’s bilingual edition of Albert Riedlinger and Charles Patois’s notebooks of Saussure’s Second Course of 1908-1909, quoted as “1908/09”, (5) the 1993 bilingual edition of Emile Constantin’s notes of Saussure’s third *Course* of 1910-1911 of Komatsu and Harris, quoted as “1910/11a” and (6) the parallel edition of Saussure’s lecture

notes together with Constantin's notes, both of the Third Course of 1910-1911 of 2006, quoted as "1910/11b". Most of the information contained in (6) is also contained in (3), but Engler's edition omits a diagram contained in Constantin's notes, which will be quoted here.

A note on terminology : Saussure called the version of the semiotics that he developed during his lifetime mostly "semiology", but since the general science of signs has been renamed "semiotics" by international agreement in the 1970s (*cf.* Nöth 1990 : 14), this paper will refer to Saussure's semiology as "semiotics", too. Differences that might still be found between the two terms are of little relevance in this context (for others, see *ibid.*).

### **Saussure's Familiarity with Economics and the Classification of the Two Sciences**

Like his Genevan colleague Adrien Naville (1845–1930), Saussure considered Semiotics and Economics as closely related branches of the tree of scientific disciplines. In the second edition of his *Nouvelle classification des sciences* of 1901 (not yet in the first, published in 1888 as *De la classification des sciences : Etude logique*), most probably under the influence of de Saussure, Naville classifies Semiotics ("Sémiologie") and Economics as "Psychological Sciences". Besides these two sciences, Sociology, Psychology Proper, and other nonspecified ones summarized as "etc.", belong to the same branch of the Tree of Knowledge (*cf.* Nöth 2021). Together with the "Physical Sciences", the "Mathematical Sciences", and a general science of laws and of the relations of dependency in general, called "Nomology", the "Psychological Sciences" belong to the main branch of the "Theorematic Sciences".

The earliest biographical traces of Saussure's interest in, and familiarity with Economics have been described by the linguist and Saussure biographer John Joseph. According to Joseph (2016), Saussure, as a student at the University of Geneva, attended the classes on Political Economy by Henri Dameth, author of an *Introduction à l'étude de l'économie politique*. After the turn of the century, the author of the *Course* became again interested in economics. His readings from these years show mainly the influence of Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904), author of a *Psychologie économique* (1902), as Koerner (1973 : 45-66) has shown. Ponzio (1977 : 163-183; and this issue) has argued that Saussure's thoughts on Political Economy show influences from the theory of economic value of the Lausanne School of Political Economy (Léon Walras & Vilfredo Pareto) (but see Thibault 1997 : 188-89 for differences). The frequently discussed hypothesis that Saussure's thoughts on Political Economy were also influenced by Saussure's contemporary Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) could not be verified (Koerner 1973).

### **Reconstruction of Saussure's General Model of a Sign**

Generations of semioticians have discussed Saussure's sign model from the *Course in General Linguistics* edited in 1916 by the Genevan linguists Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye from notes taken by some of Saussure's students (Saussure 1916). Unfortunately, the editors of 1916 were not themselves among

the students of any of the three courses in General Linguistics that Saussure delivered between 1907 and 1911. Small wonder that critical studies of the first edition have shown that Bally and Sechehaye have added some elements to Saussure's original ideas that are not entirely authentic (esp. Stawarska 2015). This is certainly true of the much quoted pictorial representation of the tree by which Saussure exemplifies his model of the linguistic sign (Joseph 2017; Figure 1, third diagram). Figure 1 shows the four main variants of the famous dyadic model of the sign represented in chapters I.1.1 and II.4.2 of the *Course* in Bally and Sechehaye's edition of 1916. Of the four, the first is the model of a verbal sign in general, the second and third are exemplifications, and the fourth represents the model of a sign in general, verbal or non-verbal.

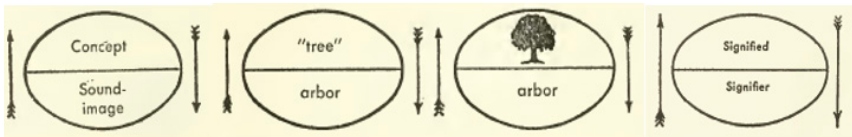


Fig. 1. - Four Representations of Saussure's Mentalist Model of the Verbal Sign in Chaps. I.1.1 and II.4.2 of his *Course* (1916b : 66, 67, 114).

Undoubtedly, except for the picture of the tree, the four diagrams are faithful to Saussure's original conception. The verbal sign has a dyadic structure. It associates a sound image with a concept, more generally, a signifier (F. *signifiant*) and a signified (*signifié*) (Saussure 1916a). Both constituents are conceived as mental representations, to use a modern term of what Saussure meant. The signifier is not an acoustic sound, a physical event, but an "inner image" (1916b : 66) of a typical pronunciation of the verbal sign. In this sense, it is without a physical materiality, but instead, the mental representation of how it would be perceived and how it should typically be pronounced. Saussure calls this a *sound image* and refers to it as a "pure acoustical sensation, the identification of that sensation with the latent sound image, the muscular image of phonation, etc." (1916b : 12).

The lateral up-down and down-up arrows of all four representations depict the reciprocity of the mental association between signifier and signified. They remind us that "the two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other" (1916b : 66). The relation is reciprocal because "in language, a concept is a quality of its phonic substance just as a particular slice of sound is a quality of the concept" (1916b : 103).

The signified is a concept, a mental representation of the sign's lexical meaning, the "idea" associated with its sound image. Saussure inquires little into its cognitive characteristics. He says, for example, that "the concept is generally more abstract" (1916b : 66) or even that it is "spiritual" (1910/11 : 220). Only Saussure's follower and founder of structuralist semantics, Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965), gave a more analytic structuralist account of the nature of the signified. According to this structuralist account of meaning, the signified is conceived as a structured set of minimal semantic units, the so-called *semes* (see Nöth 1990 : 64-73). As argued

in all of its editions of the *Course*, a signified is a concept in “a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking”, but it has only “a potential existence in each brain, or, more specifically, in the brains of a group of individuals” (1916b : 13-14). Except for the physiological argument that signs are localized in “brains” (which Peirce sees differently), this definition is somewhat compatible with the sign as a *type* (and not a *token*) in Peirce’s definition of a verbal sign.

Saussure’s example of a verbal sign is the Latin word *arbor* (Figure 1). The *Course* first represents its signified in the form of a translation of the Latin signifier into English (“tree”, originally F. “*arbre*”; Saussure 1916a : 99), distinguished from its signifier by quotation marks. In a sense, this representation is not very telling. After all, if the synchronic perspective is adopted, one would need to assume a native speaker of Latin, two thousand years ago, but to a native speaker of Latin, the signified of any word cannot have been its translation into a language spoken two thousand years later.

What Saussure meant by representing the signified as a translation of the signifier is that the signified is a concept, which can only be represented in the form of a word. However, to represent it by the same word, albeit with quotation marks, might create perplexity because the model would then appear somewhat tautologous. However that may be, Saussure (1916b : 8) does suggest elsewhere that the same word, his example is now the Latin word *nudum*, ‘naked’, may be considered as a signifier and as a signified, alternatively, if seen from different perspectives. In this understanding, the distinction between a word as a signifier and as a signified becomes a matter of viewpoint (see below) because when we speak of the concept of a tree, we use the word *tree* just the same as when we talk about the word as a phonetic form.

Nevertheless, when Saussure goes deeper into inquiring into the signified, he adopts a more analytical, genuinely structuralist, and entirely abstract position. Accordingly, the signified has no substance at all; it is not even verbal in some sense. Instead of substance, it has only *form*. The elements of sound and thought combine to “*produce a form, not a substance*” (1916b : 113). Form means structure, and structure derives from the semiotic system of differences. What a word means depends on its difference from or opposition to other words. Saussure’s dictum that summarizes this account of the signified is : “In language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it. Difference makes character just as it makes value and the unit” (1916b : 121).

The two graphic representations of the exemplary model of the verbal sign of the Latin word *arbor*, ‘tree’, in Figure 1 show the signifier in its written form. To represent the pronunciation of a word in writing may be inevitable in the medium of the book, but it is not an ideal representation for a “sound image”, whose manifestation “is sensory” and not physical (1916b : 66). It is true, though, that Saussure’s comments leave no doubt that the signifier of a verbal sign is not a written, but a spoken one.

More problematic, in Figure 1, is the representation of the signified, the mental

representation of a tree, the “concept” associated with the signifier. One of its two representations in Figure 1 is in writing, namely, in the form of the English word “tree” in quotation marks (about which, see above). The other is the drawing of a tree, which could apply to almost any tree (but hardly a palm tree, e.g.).

To represent the concept associated with a verbal signifier in the form of a picture clearly distorts Saussure’s intention because it suggests that the concept of a tree typically has a visual form. This distortion is all the more glaring since Saussure, in the same chapter, only a few paragraphs earlier, shows the same picture of a tree besides the word “*ARBOR*” (in this original spelling), precisely to criticize the “wrong assumption” that “linking a name and a thing is a very simple operation” (1916b : 65) and to prove that “the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image” (1916b : 66).

The consequence of this insight for the study of the affinities between semiotics and economics is that the pictorial representation of the signified (as in Figure 1, third variant) cannot be adopted as a model of the representation of goods and services as signs. For example, a loaf of bread or a chalet, conceived as the signified of a sign exchanged for money (see below), must not be represented in the form of a picture of a baguette or a chalet, as the model invented by Bally and Sechehaye might suggest.

If we consult Engler’s comparative edition of the notes taken by eight students of the three courses plus Saussure’s own lecture notes (Saussure 1967/68 : 148,151), only the diagrams shown in Figure 2 can count as authentic renderings of Saussure’s blackboard drawings. As Joseph (2017 : 158) concludes, “Saussure did not draw the linguistic sign containing the picture of the tree”. By the way, according to Saussure’s preliminary notes and to the notebook of his student Constantin, Saussure did not even use the Latin word *arbor* at all, but the word *arbos*, which is the poetic variant of *arbor* in Latin (as shown in Figure 2, left).



Fig. 2. - The Only Authentic Representations of Saussure’s Model of the Verbal Sign (Redrawn; See text).

While the dichotomies of “acoustic image vs. concept” and “signifier vs. signified” are the never changing cornerstones of his model of the verbal sign, Saussure hesitates as to the term by which he should designate the dyad as a whole or, as he put it, “the sign considered in its totality” (chap. II.4.4). According to Constantin’s notes, Saussure deplored that “the word *sign* left things unclear”, but added that “any term we choose (*sign*, *term*, *word*, etc.) will become slippery and risk designating only one of the parts” (1910/11a : 93a). In the end, for lack of a better option, Saussure decides, “I call the combination of a concept and a sound image a *sign* [...] and] propose to retain the word sign [F. *signe*] to designate

the whole” (1916b : 67).

### Reconstruction of, and Semiotic Reflections on Saussure’s Model of the Economic Sign

The sources that allow us to reconstruct Saussure’s authentic model of the sign are equally valuable when it comes to reconstructing Saussure’s concept of the units of which the semiotic system of an economy is composed. Since Saussure accepts the term “linguistic sign” only hesitatingly, it is not surprising that he does not use the term “economic sign” either. Neutral terms that Saussure prefers when he refers to non-verbal signs by analogy to verbal ones are *entity* or *unit*. A unit is “an element of a system” (1916b : 132), and the units of an economic system are “elements of value” (1910/11a : 136a). A terminological alternative for both the signifier and the signified is simply “thing”, e.g., when Saussure says that labor and wages are “things of different order” (1916b : 79).

However, when we see that Saussure’s graphic representation of these units (Figure 3, left) has the same design as the one by which he represents the verbal sign (Figure 2), it becomes evident that the elements of the economic system can only be signs, for if an economy is a semiotic system, it must be a system of signs. While Bally and Sechehaye’s edition of the *Course* contains no model that represents a sign of the economic system, graphic representations of such a sign by analogy to Figure 2 can be found (1) in Engler’s comparative edition of the students’ notes and in Quijano’s edition of Constantin’s notebook (Saussure 1910/11b). Figure 3 shows three extant variants of this model, (1) from Saussure’s preparatory notes, (2) from Constantin’s notebook, and (3) as the crossed-out alternative in the same notebook which shows that Saussure must also have considered the example of a chalet as an object of value, instead of a plot of land. The example that survived in the standard edition of 1916 is a plot of land (*fonds de terre*) in relation to its monetary value. It illustrates that “every value has two sides like the linguistic sign. As long as this value, at least on one side, has its basis, its root, in things – for example, a piece of land Z worth 50,000 francs” (1910/11a : 104a).

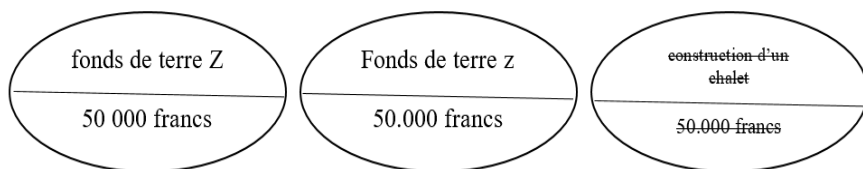


Fig. 3. - The Monetary Value of 50.000 Francs (Signifier) in its Relation to the Value of the Plot of Land that Can be Bought for it, According to Saussure’s (left) and Constantin’s Notes (Middle and Right). Authentic Drawings as Reproduced in Engler (1967/68 : 178 [Redrawn] and Saussure 1910/11b : 259).

By analogy to the model of the linguistic sign (Figure 2), we can thus conclude that the signifier of the economic sign is the money and the signified the property that can be bought for it. In Bally and Sechehaye's *Course*, Saussure's remarks concerning the value of a plot of land are condensed into the following single sentence in which the monetary value is calculated differently: "The value of a plot of ground, for instance, is related to its productivity" (1916b : 80). Here, "value" does not refer to the price of the plot, but to its annual profitability. Nevertheless, the value relation is conceived according to the same formula : a piece of land Z (signified) is worth Y francs (signifier). What both examples have in common is that economic value is measured in terms of money, which excludes alternative systems of economic exchange, such as barter, in which the value of a commodity may be another commodity for which it is exchanged without the medium of money.

Just as Saussure is only interested in language as a system and in words as tokens, his interest in the elements of an economy is an interest in goods, commodities, and services as types (units of *langue*), not as tokens (units of *parole*). But even in this respect, Saussure sees a parallelism between the viewpoints of the linguists and those of the economists. An economist has little interest in markets whose objects for sale are mere tokens, without representing a type :

Everywhere then, the problem of identities appears; moreover, it blends partially with the problem of entities and units and is only a complication – illuminating at some points – of the larger problem. This characteristic stands out if we draw some comparisons with facts taken from outside speech. For instance, we speak of the identity of two "8 : 25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris" trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals. We feel that it is the same train each day, yet everything – the locomotive, coaches, personnel – is probably different. [...] What makes the express is its hour of departure, its route, and in general every circumstance that sets it apart from other trains. Whenever the same conditions are fulfilled, the same entities are obtained. Still, the entities are not abstract since we cannot conceive of a street or train outside its material realization. (1916b : 108-109)

The identities referred to by Saussure constitute the verbal and the non-verbal sign as a *type*, a unit of a semiotic system. A train on the schedule of a railway company is an economic sign type just like a word is a sign type of a language system. These are the units of semiotic form. The variations or changes in material substance that they undergo in usage are without relevance to its form or structure. This is why the following kind of sign is an example of mere substance without form, and hence without much relevance from the viewpoint of the economic system :

Let us contrast the preceding examples with the completely different case of a suit which has been stolen from me and which I find in the window of a second-hand store. Here we have a material entity that consists solely of the inert substance – the cloth, its lining, its trimmings, etc. Another suit would not be mine regardless of its similarity to it. But linguistic identity is not that of the garment; it is that of the train and the street. Each time I say the word *Gentlemen!* I renew its substance; each utterance is a new phonic act and a new psychological act. The bond between the two uses of the same word depends neither on material identity nor on sameness in meaning but on elements which must be sought after and which will point up the true nature of linguistic units. (1916b : 109)

However, is there *one* non-verbal signified associated with the non-verbal



signifier *one dollar*, that is, with the banknote as a type? In language it is possible to generalize and to say, the signified of one dollar is ‘the quantity of goods or services that can be acquired for it’, but in the non-verbal sphere of goods and commodities, no non-verbal counterpart to a general idea can be found except in terms of money again, which would make the relation between the economic signifier (money) and its signified (money again) a tautology. In sum, if we conceive of the non-verbal sign system of the marketplace as a system of signs whose signifiers are monetary units, it is impossible to determine the signifieds of one of these units independently of its signifier.

Furthermore, why should money be the signifier of the semiotic system of an economy at all? Should not Z, the real property, be the signifier and Y, its price, the signified? Saussure gives no answer to this question at this point, but what his examples suggest is that his perspective is the one of a buyer and owner of the money who wants to spend it in an investment. For the investor, the money seems to be the signifier and the possible investment (a plot of land or a chalet) the signified in the sense that the money comes first and its investment in a property comes second. For the owner of the plot of land, interested in selling it, by contrast, the sequence is the other way round, the signifier is the property and the signified is its price, the vendor’s idea of its equivalent monetary value.

Let us now take a closer look at the signifier/signified relation exemplified above by the value of 50,000 francs as a signifier and the three alternatives of its signified, a chalet, a piece of land, or the revenue drawn from it, and consider what happens when this example is further extended. If the signifier is money, the signified, according to such a semiotic, could be a car or any other commodity of the same value. But if this is so, Saussure’s analogy between the economic and the linguistic system has a flaw insofar as a given sum of money has an almost unlimited number of signifieds. In defense of the analogy, one might say that this is also the case with general terms in language. The meaning of the word *car* is general; it is a *type* and, hence, it represents a potentially infinite number of objects. However, this interpretation would confound types with tokens, or, in Saussure’s terminology, *langue* with *parole*. The word *car* has only *one* (or very few) meaning(s), even if the number of cars that it represents is without limits.

Such a shift of perspective with which we are faced in a system of economic exchange has its counterpart in the shift of perspective in verbal communication that Saussure describes in chap. 3.2 of the Introduction to his *Course* as the “speech circuit” that connects a speaker A with a hearer B. It is also indicated in the form of the upward and downward arrows in Saussure’s sign model (Fig. 1). In the speech circuit, the first perspective is represented by the downward arrow. It indicates the process of speech production, beginning in A’s brain, where, first, “mental facts (concepts) are associated with representations of the linguistic sounds [...] which travel from the mouth of A to the ear of B” (1916b : 11-12). The second perspective, represented by the upward arrow in Figure 1, is the one of speech reception and interpretation. Now, “the order is reversed : from the ear to the brain”, where the “psychological association of the [sound] image with the corresponding concept” takes place (*ibid.*). A’s perspective, from the signified to the signifier, corresponds

to the perspective of the producer of both a verbal message and a product for sale. B's perspective, from the signifier to the signified, is the one of both the hearer of a verbal message and the buyer of a product. Besides this affinity, there are important differences. In the speech circuit, the roles of A and B switch as the dialogue goes on, from speaker to hearer and back. In economic exchange, by contrast, the roles of the participants do not switch as naturally. A buyer does not normally turn into a vendor. Furthermore, in the speech circuit, the signifier is always an acoustic image and the signified an idea. The relationship between both is not one of a viewpoint. In economic exchange, by contrast, the signifier-signified relationship changes with the viewpoint, as seen above. The object of purchase is the signified to the buyer, who spends the money, whereas the money is the signified from the vendor's perspective. In addition, there is also a difference of property. The ideas that a sender of messages exchanges remain, in a sense, the sender's property, whereas the objects of commercial exchange change their owner.

Although Saussure does not develop this account explicitly in this context, the understanding that the two sides of the dyadic economic sign are interchangeable with respect to their function as a signifier or signified is in accordance with his theory that linguistics and semiotics are sciences that create their own viewpoints :

Other sciences work with objects that are given in advance and that can then be considered from different viewpoints; but not linguistics. Someone pronounces the French word *nu* 'bare': a superficial observer would be tempted to call the word a concrete linguistic object; but a more careful examination would reveal successively three or four quite different things, depending on whether the word is considered as a sound, as the expression of an idea, as the equivalent of Latin *nudum*, etc. Far from it being the object that antedates the viewpoint, it would seem that it is the viewpoint that creates the object; besides, nothing tells us in advance that one way of considering the fact in question takes precedence over the others or is in any way superior to them. (Saussure 1916b : 8)

Hence, the question whether goods and services are the signifiers or the signifieds of a sign depends on the semiotic viewpoint. However, Saussure's focus is actually as little on actual economic transactions as it is on speech acts (on *parole*, in Saussure's terminology). Instead, he seeks to compare two sciences of value to demonstrate that signifiers and signifieds in both semiotic systems are of a "different order". When he clarifies this purpose, Saussure introduces, as a further example, the value of labor. "Both sciences are concerned with a *system for equating things of different orders* – labor and wages in one and a signifier and signified in the other" (1916b : 79). In this formulation, the parallelism between the two dyads leaves no doubt that work is the signifier, whereas the wages paid for it constitute the signified of the signs of the labor market.

After the real estate and the labor markets, Saussure considers the food market as another semiotic system where the "inner duality" (1916b : 79) of values is endemic. Here, the example concerns the value of the amount of bread that can be bought for a 5-franc coin. "To determine what a five-franc piece is worth, one must [...] know that it can be exchanged for a fixed quantity of a different thing, e.g., bread [...]" (1916b : 115). The example will be examined in greater detail below, but we can anticipate the following. If the formula "Z is worth Y (francs)",

by analogy to Figure 3, means that Z is the signified and Y is the signifier, we are once more faced with an economic sign whose signifier is a monetary value and the signified is a commodity that is exchanged for it. Figure 4 summarizes the last two examples in the form of diagrams reconstructed from Saussure's lectures by analogy to the model represented in Figure 3. The figure also confirms that the place of the monetary value in the structure of the signs is a matter of perspective. In the case of the labor market, the money paid for work appears as the signified, whereas in the case of the food market, it is represented as the signifier.

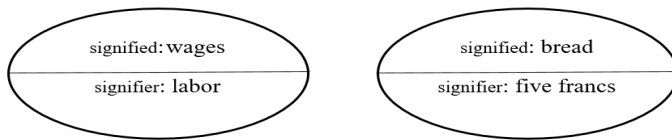


Fig. 4. - Labor Market : Labor as Signifier / Wages as Signified. Food Market : a 5-franc Piece as Signifier / Quantity Z of Bread as the Signified (See text).

### The Synchronic Perspective in the Study of Semiotic Systems : Language and Economy

In chapter I.3.1 of his *Course*, Saussure discusses Political Economy in the context of the synchronic approach as a method of a science of values. Its distinction from the diachronic approach is essential, not only to Linguistics, but also to Political Economy, he argues. The synchronic approach is “already forcing itself upon the economic sciences”, too, where “political economy and economic history constitute two clearly separated disciplines within a single science” (1916b : 79). The reason why the synchronic approach should also be adopted in the study of markets is mentioned only briefly. Values are relations of simultaneity. Yesterday's values do not determine today's values, which are values between elements of a system : “A value [...] depends at each moment upon a system of coexisting values” (1916b : 80).

Saussure does not elaborate to what extent Political Economy had adopted a synchronic perspective in his time, but if there was such a paradigm shift, it cannot have been a shift entirely similar to the synchronic approach in linguistics, as proposed in the *Course*. The synchronic perspective on language can afford to ignore that language changes over time since such changes take at least a whole generation before they make some difference in communication. Linguists adopt the synchronic perspective because, “to know to just what extent a thing is a [linguistic] reality, it is necessary and sufficient to determine to what extent it exists in the minds of speakers” in their lifetime (1916b : 90). The synchronic perspective is not only an option but even a necessity if the linguist wishes to understand a language as a system, argues Saussure. For this purpose, a linguist “must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony [since] he can enter the mind of speakers only by completely suppressing the past. The intervention of history

can only falsify his judgement" (1916b : 81).

The argument of the affinity between Linguistics and Political Economy with respect to the synchronic approach, as expounded in the few sentences dedicated to the subject in the *Course* of 1916, does not convince entirely. It is hard to see how economists can adopt the synchronic perspective as radically as linguists can. In contrast to language change, changes that occur in an economy may be rapid, frequent, and, in the case of hyperinflation, they may even have catastrophic effects. Commodity markets fix the prices of raw products at daily rates. A plague of insects may double the value of agricultural products overnight, and even supermarket prices change continuously with their daily offers and in accordance with the inflation rate. The idea that it is advantageous to buy today, because the price may rise tomorrow (or vice versa), is often a decisive factor in purchasing decisions. Diachronic considerations are thus omnipresent in consumer decisions. Hence, markets are systems for which diachrony is constitutive.

Admittedly, Saussure does not entirely ignore the element of diachrony in economic systems, but his ideas on matters of Political Economy were clearly written in times of great economic stability that seemed to justify some neglect of changes in market values. In the notes to the Third Course, he comments on the variations of the value of a plot of land in the *Course* of time as follows :

Il est encore relativement possible de suivre cette valeur dans le temps avec ses variations, sans oublier cependant qu'à tout moment on pourra en douter (quand on pense par exemple que la contre-valeur comme 50 000 est elle-même sujette à varier selon les moments d'abondance de l'or, etc.). Mais cela garde une certaine base tangible, les matérialités resteront là. (Saussure 1910/11a : 259)

While Bally and Sechehaye say little more about the synchronic approach to Economics, Riedlinger, in his notes taken during Saussure's Second *Course* of 1908/09, reports that Saussure further substantiated his argument with the argument that both sciences deal with "semiological systems", "systems of units [...] which are signs" having value (Saussure 1908/09 : 14a). As a system of values, a semiotic system is concerned with forms, not with substances, but forms are synchronic structures, affirms Saussure. "It is not the vocal phonic substance which seems to us to be the heart of what makes a word. [...]. In a certain sense, the phonic phenomenon is foreign to the essence of the language. How? Other values must be compared" (*ibid.* : 15a). The value of a unit of a semiotic system, the sign, thus derives from its relations to other units of the same system, which are relations in synchrony.

As Riedlinger reports, Saussure then applies the argument concerning the value of verbal signs to the value of the monetary units of an economic system. His example is the value of a French *écu*, a coin that had actually disappeared since the French Revolution, but whose name continued to be used for a 5-*franc* silver coin in Saussure's time. Just as the word *arbre* depends on the meaning of other words, the value of the French *écu* depends on the one of the *franc*. The relation between the *écu* and a *franc*, as a synchronic relation, is : 1 *écu* = 5 *francs*. Only the relation is important, not the material substance of the two coins. The system is also determined by synchronic political boundaries just like a linguistic system

is determined by its geolinguistic or dialectal boundaries (the so-called isoglosses). This is what Saussure said, according to Riedlinger's notes :

It would be to make a gross error to believe that the material contained in money is what fixes its value : many other things besides determine it. For example, the *écu* has a value of  $\frac{1}{4}$  of 20 francs, the metal  $\frac{1}{8}$  of the value, and with some other effigy it might be worth nothing at all! On one side of the border it is worth such and such amount; on the other such and such other amount. (Saussure 1908/09 : 15a)

### Determining Semiotic Values from Similar Things in their Relation to Dissimilar Ones

In chapter II.4.2 of his *Course*, Saussure takes up the topic of the affinity between language and economy again and introduces a new argument. Under the heading "Linguistic Value from a Conceptual Viewpoint", he expounds that "all sciences concerned with values" (1916b : 79) are confronted with the paradox of the simultaneity of similar and dissimilar things. The sciences of linguistics and economics are both "concerned with a system for equating things of different orders – labor and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other" (1916b : 79). In language, this duality manifests itself in the twofold association of a concept or signified with its signifier or sound image, on the one hand (ex.: the sound /*arbor*/ with the idea of a tree in the mind of a speaker of Latin), and with other concepts that delimit its meaning, on the other :

On the one hand, the concept seems to be the counterpart of the sound-image, and on the other hand the sign itself is in turn the counterpart of the other signs of language. Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others, as in the diagram [below, Figure 5]. (1916b : 114)

The "dissimilar things" associated in the mind of a speaker are the signifier and the signified of the language sign, as represented in Figure 1, the model of the Latin word *arbor*. The meaning (signified) is dissimilar to the sound image of a verbal sign.



Fig. 5. - The Association of "Similar Things" within a Semiotic System (Saussure 1916b : 115)

To represent the "similar things" associated with a given verbal sign, Saussure draws the diagram of Figure 5, which shows a sequence of three unspecified verbal signs in a row, meant not to represent a syntagmatic sequence of words, but a chain of semantical associations between them. The words in this chain need not

mean the same (as synonyms) or have similar meanings; they can even mean the opposite, for example. The similarity that Saussure postulates between them is thus not strictly semantic. The diagram is only meant to represent the general idea that there are three verbal signs somehow associated among themselves. In this sense, all words actually belong to the class of “similar things”. Of course, some words are more similar in relation to the first than others.

The relations of similarity represented along a horizontal axis of Figure 5 are those kinds of relations that Saussure later, in chapter II.5.3 of the *Course*, defines as “associative relations”. There, such relations among words are represented diagrammatically along a vertical dimension. How the projection of the associative relations from the horizontal to the vertical axis should be conceived can be gathered from a remark Saussure made in his class on values in the beginning of his Second *Course* of 1908/09. According to the notes taken by the student Charles Patois, Saussure commented as follows (Saussure 1908/09 : 117a) :

We see that the social fact alone will create what is in the language, in a semiological system, for there is no value in any order except by virtue of the collectivity. We see at the same time the incorporeal nature of words, of signs, whatever they may be. [...] The value of a five-franc coin is not constituted by the value of the metal which goes into it; many other things determine its value. We know it is worth ¼ of a twenty-franc coin; as far as the metal is concerned it is worth only 1/8 [...]. The sound, like the metal, is an element which forms only one aspect of the thing. Thus we have incorporeal entities. The idea also will represent only one of the elements of value. The word too is not formed just by the complexity of idea and sound :

	A	B
<u>idea</u>	<u>idea a</u>	<u>idea b</u>
sound	sound a	sound b

We [also] have to consider the relationship of

	A
<u>to</u>	B

In sum, Figure 5 needs to be read as the extension of Figure 1 by associations, of which only three are represented, whereas an indeterminate number of others are suggested in the form of dotted lines in continuation to the left and to the right. If one of the three unspecified ovals is filled by the signifier *tree* with the concept of a ‘tree’ as its signified, the other signs of this associative chain could be filled with *shrub, bush, oak, palm, grass, flower, post, stake*, etc., that is, with words that are semantically similar to or opposites of *tree*. The chain represents Saussure’s argument that the meaning of the word *tree* is delimited by the meanings associated with it, as can be exemplified by definitions, such as, “A *shrub* is a low, usually several-stemmed woody plant” or “A *bush* grows lower than a shrub, having

thicker foliage” etc.

Saussure does not only restrict himself to the value of similar things in relation to dissimilar ones, he also considers value as a relation between similar things. The latter is his topic when he discusses the system of monetary units and the forms of their exchange as follows: “To determine what a five-franc piece is worth, one must know [...] that it can be compared with a similar value of the same system, e.g. a one-franc piece, or with coins of another system (a dollar, etc.)” (1916b : 115). The relation of dissimilarities are his topic in his references to the money/bread, money/property, or labor/wages relationships of value. Saussure clarifies what he means by such parallels in greater detail as follows :

In the same way a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. Its value is therefore not fixed so long as one simply states that it can be ‘exchanged’ for a given concept, *i.e.*, that it has this or that signification : one must also compare it with similar values, with other words that stand in opposition to it. (Saussure 1916b : 115)

The comparison of words with words as a comparison of similar things has its analogue in the purchase of goods. Economic value should not only be sought in the quantity of goods that a certain amount of money can buy, which would amount to a relation between dissimilar things, but also in other goods of similar value, such as two plots of land, Y and Z, a chalet, loaves of bread, cabbages or apples. This insight is represented diagrammatically in Constantin’s notes by means of a horizontal two-headed arrow (as in Fig. 5) to indicate relations of similar units and vertical arrows pointing upwards to represent the association between the relation of dissimilarity between signifiers and a signifieds (as in Fig. 1). The student wrote :

Value is determined (1) by a dissimilar thing that can be exchanged, and that can be marked  $\uparrow$  and (2) by similar things that can be compared  $\longleftrightarrow$ .

$\leftarrow \leftarrow \uparrow \rightarrow \rightarrow$

These two elements are essential for value. For example, a 20-franc coin. Its value is [(1)] a matter of a dissimilar thing that I can exchange (e.g. pounds of bread), (2) the comparison between the 20-franc coin and one-franc and two-franc coins, etc., or coins of similar value (guinea). The value is at the same time the counterpart of the one and the counterpart of the other. (Saussure 1910/11 : 135a-136a)

However, the analogy between linguistic and economic signs, as recorded in Constantin’s notes and in Bally and Sechehaye’s edition (Saussure 1916b : 115), as discussed above, is not perfectly symmetrical (see also Holdcroft 1991 : 111). It is only very roughly adequate to say that the exchange of money for goods and services is an exchange of dissimilar things and that the coins of different denominations are as much similar things as the different signifiers of a language. A closer look at the two systems of units, allegedly similar between themselves, coins and phonemes, reveals fundamental differences. Whereas the nominal values of a currency are only multiples or fractions of a single elementary value of the currency (a franc or a dollar), and even their exchange value in relation to another currency is only a multiple of it, the only commonalities between the signifiers of a language consist of the phoneme as their elementary unit. The differences between them, as well

as within the systems of which they are elements, are extremely complex. While sound systems combine their units according to arbitrary and conventional principles, currencies are made up of algebraic, and hence highly motivated principles.

### Differences in Substance, Value, and Relations Between Signifiers and Signifieds

Despite all analogies and affinities, Saussure also points out differences between the objects studied by the two sciences, and hence, the limits of his analogy between linguistics and semiotics. Above, we commented on one difference between linguistic and economic signs: in economic exchange, signifiers and signifieds are interchangeable in a sense in which they are not in verbal exchange. Three other semiotic differences are equally fundamental, the difference with respect to the materiality of the signs, the one between the kinds of values represented by the signs, and the one concerning the arbitrariness of the signs.

The first concerns the materiality of the two kinds of sign. Despite his affirmation that language is pure form, Saussure occasionally discusses the materiality of language signs as a matter of their *substance*, for example, when he says, “Phonic substance is neither more fixed nor more rigid than thought; it is not a mold into which thought must of necessity fit but a plastic substance divided in turn into distinct parts to furnish the signifiers needed by thought” (1916b : 109). The conception of the linguistic sign as a purely mental entity has no analogy in an economy. Objects of commercial exchange neither may be conceived as purely mental entities nor are their signifiers and signifieds related in a purely arbitrary way. While it may be arbitrary that gold is called *or* in French but *guld* in Danish, its financial value is hardly different in France and in Denmark.

In his paper “Words and Things, Goods and Services”, the anthropologist Paul Manning criticizes Saussure’s interpretation of the value of economic goods precisely in this respect, namely as “an attempt to assimilate the economic to the linguistic order” and to “dematerialize commodities” (2006 : 270). It is true that Saussure’s remarks on analogies between the two sciences is certainly only sketchy and limited, but he does acknowledge that the signifieds of the marketplace have a materiality that he denies to words. In fact, Manning’s critique of the alleged overemphasis on abstractness in linguistics and economics is not restricted to Saussure, being directed, more generally, against the two sciences of linguistics and economics in general, to which the author attributes a “drive to isolate an integral object (language, economy) that can be studied apart from other considerations, and their consequent tendency to naturalize that object on the basis of purportedly universal human tendencies (talk is apparently as natural to humans as the propensity to truck and barter)” (*ibid.* : 272).

Manning’s insinuation that Saussure “reads economic value as if it were linguistic value” (2006 : 272) turns out to be utterly untenable when Saussure’s reflections on economic in comparison to linguistics signs are considered, not only with reference to the few lines in which he explicitly compares economic and linguistic facts, but also in the context of non-verbal signs in general. In these contexts, Saussure distinguished very clearly between sign systems that are more



and those that are less like a language. While in the study of language, “natural data have no place” (1916b : 80), the same does not apply to the goods and services exchanged in an economy, where the objects of study are connected on “a natural basis” (*ibid.*).

A semiotic system that Saussure liked to discuss because he considered its non-verbal signs most similar to the ones of a language is the chess game (1916b : 22-23, 88-89, 107, 110) : “Of all comparisons that might be imagined, the most fruitful is the one that might be drawn between the functioning of language and a game of chess”. “A game of chess is like an artificial realization of what language offers in a natural form” (1916b : 88). The signs of a chess game are more like a language because their materiality is as irrelevant to their function within the system as the materiality of language signs is. If a chess piece gets lost, any other arbitrary token, for example a pebble, can substitute it as long as the value that distinguishes it from all other pieces remains assured :

Take a knight, for instance. By itself is it an element in the game? Certainly not, for by its material make-up – outside its square and the other conditions of the game – it means nothing to the player; it becomes a real, concrete element only when endowed with value and wedded to it. Suppose that the piece happens to be destroyed or lost during a game. Can it be replaced by an equivalent piece? Certainly. Not only another knight but even a figure shorn of any resemblance to a knight can be declared identical provided the same value is attributed to it. We see then that in semiological systems like language, where elements hold each other in equilibrium in accordance with fixed rules, the notion of identity blends with that of value and vice versa. (1916b : 110)

Notice, however, that a game of chess has also a commercial value, which will come close to zero when one of its pieces is defective or got lost. Although the substitution of the knight for a pebble does not affect its value within the semiotic system of the game, it does affect greatly its commercial value. Whereas in chess as well as in language, the values are exclusively or at least predominantly conceptual, the values of the signs of an economic system are much more, and sometimes even essentially, material.

Saussure’s writings also invalidate Manning’s criticism of Saussure’s semiotics when it comes to the principle of arbitrariness. In language, signifiers and signifieds are associated in an arbitrary way in the sense that a concept is essentially unrelated to its sound image since the same idea could also be expressed by means of other sounds. Hence, “the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary (1916b : 113). The relations between the signifiers and signifieds of an economy, by contrast, are “never completely arbitrary” (1916b : 80). They derive from natural and social institutions based “on natural relations between things”, and “all have of necessity adapted the means employed to the ends pursued” (1916b : 75).

The principle of arbitrariness, essential in language but not in economy, also explains why language is more typically a semiotic system than an economy. “Signs that are wholly arbitrary”, that is, only language signs, “realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic” (1916b :

68). A partial summary of the differences between language and economy is the following, which deserves to be quoted because it sheds light on the differences between the values characteristic of language and economy :

Language is a system of pure values which are determined by nothing except the momentary arrangement of its terms. A value – so long as it is somehow rooted in things and in their natural relations, as happens with economics (the value of a plot of ground, for instance, is related to its productivity) – can to some extent be traced in time if we remember that it depends at each moment upon a system of coexisting values. Its link with things gives it, perforce, a natural basis, and the judgments that we base on such values are therefore never completely arbitrary; their variability is limited. But we have just seen that natural data have no place in linguistics. (Saussure 1916b : 80)

Saussure characterizes the differences between linguistic and economic values in several ways. Above, he distinguishes between pure values in language and values “rooted in things” of economic units. Elsewhere, he characterizes linguistic values as purely *negative* in the sense that they are exclusively differential and in this sense “empty” :

Instead of pre-existing ideas then, we find in all the foregoing examples values emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not. (1916b : 117)

Saussure characterizes the language sign as “empty” (1916b : 68), an expression which he preferred in his earlier writings (*cf.* Tu 2016). Whereas the objects studied by him may evince emptiness in their substance and represent values that are purely negative, the signs of economy represent values that may be called positive, by contrast, even though Saussure did not use this term explicitly. The negative value of a verbal signifier, even proverbially the epitome of emptiness according to the proverb that they “are just sound and air”, contrasts sharply with the positive values of commodities. As Saussure puts it, these values are “rooted in things and in their natural relations, as happens with economics (the value of a plot of ground)” (1916b : 80). Even the signifier of money, considered as a signifier, may have a positive value, at least it had in Saussure’s time, although it was already mixed with arbitrariness. “A coin nominally worth five francs may contain less than half its worth of silver. Its value will vary according to the amount stamped upon it and according to its use inside or outside a political boundary” (1916b : 118). Even more so, the values of signifieds in an economy tend to be rooted in their substance, and not merely in their difference to other signifieds.

### **Semiotic Models of the Economic Sign after Saussure : Lefebvre, Rossi-Landi, Baudrillard, and Cultural Anthropologists**

In the era of semiotic structuralism, Saussure’s conception of the commodity as a sign and of the economy as a semiotic system was taken up and reconsidered, mostly in light of Karl Marx’s interpretation of the commodity as a “social hieroglyphic”, a sign that associates a use value with an exchange value. The discussion had its focus mainly on the sign nature of the commodity. The conception of

the market as a system, by contrast, advanced little. Henri Lefebvre (1966 : 342) restricted himself to a reflection on “the world of commodities [...] as constituting a system of signs, a language, a semiotic field”, whereas Jean Baudrillard, in *Le système des objets* offers merely hypothetical reflections on the topic in the following poetic prose :

In urban civilization, we are faced with generations of objects, appliances and gadgets [...] succeeding each other in an accelerating rhythm. [...] The objects of daily use proliferate, the needs multiply, the production accelerates their birth and death. Our vocabulary is insufficient to name them all. Can one hope to classify a world of objects which changes in the very process of being observed? (Baudrillard 1968 : 7)

The phase of structuralist semiotic reflections on the sign nature of the commodity began with Henri Lefebvre. Combining Marx’s dichotomy of exchange vs. use value with the Saussurean dyadic sign model, he defined the commodity as a “signifier, which is the object susceptible of exchange” associated with a “signified which is the possible [...] satisfaction derived from its purchase” (Lefebvre 1966 : 342). The contrast to Saussure’s model of the commodity is significant. The place of the object for sale is inverted in the two models. Whereas the plot of land or the loaf of bread is the signified in Saussure’s model (Figs. 3 & 4), it is now the signifier, although it not conceived as an object of economic value as such, but rather as its use value. Its counterpart – for Saussure, the monetary value of the object – is now its exchange value. Despite the inversion of the positions of the two sides of the sign, the model is still Saussurean insofar as it is based on the signifier-signified dichotomy. In addition, Lefebvre is also inspired by Saussure’s doctrine that the value of a commodity derives not only from its dyadic counterpart, but also from its paradigmatic relationship to other commodities of the same system, the conception of value represented in Figure 5 :

*L’objet recèle dès lors une dualité interne, qui renvoie aussitôt à une latéralité. L’objet, en effet, ne reçoit pas cette forme séparément, mais par rapport à un autre objet ou à des groupes d’objets dans lesquels il s’insère et par lesquels il prend valeur. La chaîne des marchandises se découpe en séquences, en unités signifiantes [...] : tout s’achète et se vend. La chaîne est illimitée. [...] Pour chaque objet et chaque groupe d’objets, la valeur d’échange ne se spécifie que par une double confrontation : actuelle, avec d’autres objets, virtuelle, avec la totalité.* (Lefebvre 1966 : 343)

Only briefly does the semiotic model of the commodity proposed by Rossi-Landi have to be referenced here since his ideas are the topic of more detailed analyses in other papers of this volume (see also Bianchi 2015). More than all others, Rossi-Landi strives for a synthesis of Saussure’s with Marx’s interpretation of the commodity. For Rossi-Landi (1968 : 71; 1975 : 127-133), the commodity is a non-verbal signifier that has only one signified, namely, its exchange value, which corresponds to the amount of work necessary for its production. In this, Rossi-Landi follows Karl Marx’s *Capital*, where the labor theory of exchange value is developed in the chapter “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret”. Of course, a commodity is also associated with a use value, but Rossi-Landi argues that objects of material culture are *goods* with respect to use values, not commodities. This distinction between goods and commodities has its roots in Adam Smith’s philosophy of economy (*cf.* Milgate 1987 : 547). To account for this

interpretation two sign models are needed, one for commodities and the other for goods. A commodity is a sign whose signifier is a non-verbal object for sale and whose signified is its exchange value. Goods are signs whose signifiers are the material objects of a culture and whose signifieds are their utility, their use values.

In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard proposed an extension of the Saussurean model, which attributes a multiplicity of signifieds, use and exchange values, to a commodity (Baudrillard 1972 : 137). With Adam Smith, Baudrillard restricts the term *commodity* to objects considered from the perspective of their exchange value only. Furthermore, with reference to his general semiotic theory of objects (Baudrillard 1968), he discerns four values as the signifieds of any object of the marketplace (Baudrillard 1972 : 66). First, its exchange value. It transforms the object into a commodity that follows the logic of the market, which is a logic of equivalence since all goods are “universally commutable” from the point of view of their price (*cf. ibid.* : 69). Second, its use value, which characterizes the commodity as an instrument subject to a logic of utility and practical operations. Third, its symbolic value, which is relevant to gifts and objects of such exchange rituals. Fourth, its “sign value”, which derives from the paradigmatic dimension of objects of consumption, manifesting itself in the form of a brand or a trademark. This value is charged with differential connotations of status, prestige, and fashion. “Dissociated from its use value, the object can now just as easily be a vase or a refrigerator, or, for that matter, a whoopee cushion. Properly speaking, it has no more existence than a phoneme has an absolute meaning in linguistics. [...] It finds meaning with other objects, in difference, according to a hierarchical code of significations” (Baudrillard 1972 : 64). The logic of difference inherent in this kind of the value of a commodity is best illustrated by the ongoing “compulsion to innovate signs in the domain of fashion” (*cf. ibid.* : 79).

However, Baudrillard soon begins to deconstruct his semiotic model of the commodity, arguing that the use and exchange value of a commodity are not autonomous planes of a dyadic sign, forming instead a functional hierarchy in their apparent bipolarity : “Absolute preeminence redounds to exchange value and the signifier. Use value and needs are only an effect of exchange value. Signified (and referent) are only an effect of the signifier [...]. Neither is an autonomous reality [...]. At bottom, they are only simulation models, produced by the play of exchange value and of signifiers” (Baudrillard 1972 : 137).

Thus, semiotics turns into an instrument of an ideological critique of a consumer society in which the use value of objects is ultimately not determined by the consumers’ needs, but by the logic of the market creating these needs. In this perspective, a commodity is no longer a sign but the simulation of a sign. The signified is “now abolished to the sole profit of the play of signifiers [...]. The signifier becomes its own referent and the use value of the sign disappears to the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone. The sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches its true structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs” (Baudrillard 1973 : 127-128). However, Baudrillard does not only deconstruct Saussure’s model of the economic sign as the relationship between a signifier and a signified (Fig. 1). He also takes inspiration from Saussure’s

second structuralist tenet according to which the meaning of a sign has its root in its difference to other signs (*cf.* Fig. 2) to which the sign necessarily harks back.

Baudrillard's critique of the naive assumption of natural need and practical utility as determinants of the system of economic exchange has remarkable parallels in cultural anthropology that interprets the relationship between signifiers and signifieds of goods in material culture as arbitrary for other reasons than Baudrillard's, namely of cultural relativity. Marshall Sahlins (1976), for example, raises objections against the widespread view that goods and commodities are determined by utility and a logic of practical reasons. Instead, he argues, that cultural values are essentially *arbitrary*, in the sense in which cultural values signified by goods are essentially determined by conventions and not by their own nature. Even consumers' choices of foods are determined by the meanings their culture attributes to them, instead of nutritional values, so that, in conclusion, "utility is not a quality of the object"; it is "no more apparent from its physical properties than is the value it may be assigned in exchange. Use-value is not less symbolic or less arbitrary than commodity-value" (1976 : 169).

This thesis of the semiotic character of goods and commodities has even more radically been defended by Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood. In their anthropology of goods they even go so far as to reject the notion of use values altogether :

The essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense. Forget the idea of consumer irrationality. Forget the idea that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a medium for the human creative faculty. (Douglas & Isherwood 1979 : 62)

With such arguments in support of the thesis of cultural arbitrariness of goods and commodities, the relativist in cultural anthropology (*pace* Manning, as discussed above) together with the deconstructive poststructuralist Baudrillard turn out to be more Saussurean than Saussure himself. While Saussure, despite his conviction that "signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the "others the ideal of the semiological process" (1916b : 68), interpreted the relations between the signifiers and signifieds of commodities as "natural relations between things" or connections by a "natural bond" (1916b : 68, 75), the cultural relativists and critics of the consumer society aim at negating such bonds. Denying natural meanings to goods and commodities, they deny their roots in the materiality of things and interpret them as a system "determined by nothing except the momentary arrangement of its terms" (Saussure 1916b : 80).

### Some Post-Saussurean Perspectives

Despite the great influence of Saussure's model of the commodity as a sign, conceived by analogy to the verbal sign, the diversity of the interpretations of this model in structuralist semiotics shows that the analogies on which it is based are rather weak. One symptom of its weaknesses is the facility with which the position of signifier and signifieds can change from interpreter to interpreted. Another is the tendency of some authors to reduce the semiotic complexity of the commodity to

a single signified instead of recognizing the plural potential and semantic diversity associated with them (*cf.* Nöth 1988). The very tendency of marketing to maximize the differences between the objects for sale and to minimize the similarities between them speaks against the assumption that the attribution of a single or even a limited number of signifieds to the signifier of a commodity. However, the main deficiency of the Saussurean model is that it is founded on the model of a single word (the word *arbos* of Fig. 1). Saussure seems to have been aware of this shortcoming himself when he underlined that “all definitions of words are made in vain; starting from words in defining things is a bad procedure” (1916b : 14). The meaning of a commodity is only rarely described sufficiently in terms of single words. It has at least the character of a proposition, a sentence that attributes a quality to it (“Winston tastes good...”). Marketing campaigns, however, are not satisfied with words or mere propositions. They aim at creating more complex signifieds, arguments (which are mostly mere enthymemes) or whole myths, such as the nowadays almost forgotten myth of the cigarette smoking cowboy to illustrate the cliché of the lifestyle promised to the consumers by the marketing strategists of a well-known brand of cigarettes.

The weakness of Saussure’s analogy does not speak against its heuristic potential for semiotics. Even “the modern mind, so dull about metaphors” must acknowledge that analogies and “mere figures of speech” do not render arguments useless, as Peirce reminded us (CP 4.435, 2.230).

## Notes

1. The author is greatly indebted to Dr. George Rossolatos, Athens, for valuable comments and useful suggestions.

## Bibliography

- BAUDRILLARD, J. (1981[1972]) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis, MO : Telos.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1968) *Le système des objets*. Paris : Gallimard.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1981 [1972]) *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis, MO : Telos.
- BIANCHI, C. (2015) “Ferruccio Rossi-Landi : Language, Society and Semiotics”. *In Ocula* (16) : 1-28.
- DOUGLAS, M., & ISHERWOOD, B. (1979). *The World of Goods*. New York : Norton.
- HJELMSLEV, L. (1961 [1943]) *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Madison, WI : University of Wisconsin Press.
- HOLDCROFT, D. (1991) *Saussure : Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- IRVINE, J. T. (1989) “When Talk Isn’t Cheap : Language and Political Economy”. *In American Ethnologist* (16)2 : 248-267.
- JOSEPH, J. E. (2016) “Saussure’s Value(s)”. *In Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* (34)1-3 : 191-208.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2017) “The Arbre-Tree Sign : Pictures and Words in Counterpoint in the Cours de linguistique générale”. *In Semiotica* (217)1 : 147-171.
- KOCKELMAN, P. (2006) “A Semiotic Ontology of the Commodity”. *In Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* (16) : 76-102.
- KOERNER, E.F.K. (1973) *Ferdinand de Saussure : Origin and Development of his Linguistic Thought in Western Studies of Language. A Contribution to the History and Theory of*

- Linguistics*. Braunschweig : Vieweg.
- LATOUCHE, S. (1973) "Linguistique, structuralisme et marxisme". In *L'Homme et la société* (28) : 51-70.
- LEFEBVRE, H. (1966) *Le langage et la société*. Paris : Gallimard.
- LOTMAN, J.M. (2013) *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, Baer, B.J. (trans.), Ivanov, V.V. (pref.), Pilshchikov, I. and Salupere, S. (Eds.). Tallinn : Tallinn University Press.
- MANNING, P. (2006) "Words and Things, Goods and Services : Problems of Translation Between Language and Political Economy". In *Language & Communication* (26) : 270-284.
- MARX, K. (1976 [1867]) *Capital*, vol. 1. B. Fowles (trans.), E. Mandel, & New Left Review Eds.). Harmondsworth : Penguin.
- MILGATE, M. (1987) "Goods and Commodities". In *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, vol. 2. J. Eatwell, M. Milgate, & P. Newman (Eds.). London : MacMillan : 546-549.
- NAVILLE, A. (2012 [1901]) *Nouvelle classification des sciences : Étude philosophique*. Memphis, TN : General Books LLC.
- NÖTH, W. (1988) "The Language of Commodities". In *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (4) : 173-186.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1990) *Handbook of Semiotics*. Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2021) "Linguistics and Semiotics in the Framework of the Sciences in General". In *Cahiers de l'Institut de linguistique et des sciences du langage* (Lausanne) (65) : 29-50.
- PEIRCE, C. S. (1931-1958) *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. C. Hartshorne, & P. Weiss (eds.), 1931-1935, vols. 1-6, 1931-35 A. W. Burks (ed.), vol. 7-8, 1958, Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press (quoted as CP, vol. and §).
- PONZIO, A. (1977) *Marxismo, scienza e problema dell'uomo*. Verona : Bertani.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1993) "Commodities and Messages". In *Signs, Dialogue, and Ideology*. Amsterdam : Benjamins : 11-15.
- ROSSI-LANDI, F. (1975) *Linguistics and Economics*. The Hague : Mouton.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1983 [1968]) *Language as Work and Trade*. South Hadley, MA : Bergin & Garvey.
- SAHLINS, M. (1976) *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago, IL : Chicago University Press.
- SAUSSURE, F. de (1931 [1916a]) *Cours de linguistique générale*, 3ème éd. Paris : Payot.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1959 [1916b]) *Course in General Linguistics*, Bally, C. & Sechehaye, A. (Eds.), Riedlinger, A. (collab.), Baskin, W. (trans.), New York, NY : Philosophical Library.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1967-68). *Cours de linguistique générale : édition critique*, fasc. I-III, Engler, R. (Ed.), Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1996 [1908-1909]) *Saussure's Second Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1908-1909) : From the Notebooks of Albert Riedlinger and Charles Patois*. E. Komatsu, & G. Wolf (Eds. and trans.), Oxford : Pergamon.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1993 [1910-1911a]) *Troisième cours de linguistique générale (1910-1911) d'après les cahiers d'Emile Constantin*. E. Komatsu, & R. Harris (Eds.), Oxford : Pergamon.
- \_\_\_\_\_. & CONSTANTIN, E. (2006 [1910-1911b]) *Ferdinand de Saussure : Notes préparatoires pour le cours de linguistique générale, 1910-1911*. D. Gambarara (transcription) and \_\_\_\_\_. *Linguistique générale : Cours de M. le professeur de Saussure 1910-1911*, C. M. Quijano, (Ed.) and C. Sandoz (Collab.) [two editions in one]. In *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure* (58) : 83-289.
- STAWARSKA, B. (2015) *Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology : Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- THIBAUT, P. J. (1997) *Re-Reading Saussure : The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*. London : Routledge.
- TU, Y. (2016) "Saussure's Sôme (or Aposème) and Parasôme (or Parasème) : Some New Reflections". In *Language and Semiotic Studies* (2)3 : 48-72.

## Abstract

The paper reconstructs, from the manuscripts of the *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure's reflections on the affinities and differences between linguistics and economics,

particularly his model of commodities as signs and elements of the economic system, analogous to the verbal sign as a basic unit of the language system. Key notions of this comparison are signified vs. signifier, arbitrariness, syntagmatic and paradigmatic association, positive vs. negative value, type and token, substance and form. The paper studies how H. Lefebvre, J. Baudrillard, Rossi-Landi, and the cultural anthropologists M. Sahlins, M. Douglas, and B. Isherwood apply elements of this model in analyses of goods and commodities. The paper argues that Saussure proposes a weak analogy, that one of its weaknesses is the comparison at the level of the word instead of the one of a proposition or an argument. It concludes with the affirmation that Saussure's analogies have a great heuristic value for cultural semiotics.

**Keywords :** Semiotics; Economics; F. de Saussure; Commodity; Sign; Signifier; Signified

## Résumé

À partir des manuscrits du *Cours de linguistique générale*, l'article reconstruit les réflexions de Saussure sur la question des affinités et des différences entre la linguistique et l'économie, en particulier, son modèle des marchandises comme signes et éléments du système économique, analogue au signe verbal comme unité de base du système linguistique. Les notions-clés de cette étude sont le caractère arbitraire du signifiant par rapport au signifié, les associations syntagmatiques et paradigmaticques des signes, la valeur positive par rapport à la valeur négative, type et token, substance et forme. L'article étudie comment H. Lefebvre, J. Baudrillard, Rossi-Landi, et les anthropologues culturels M. Sahlins, M. Douglas et B. Isherwood appliquent des éléments de ce modèle dans leurs analyses des biens et des marchandises. Il affirme que Saussure propose une faible analogie et qu'une de ses faiblesses est la comparaison au niveau du mot plutôt qu'au niveau d'une proposition ou d'un argument. Il conclut en affirmant que les analogies de Saussure ont néanmoins une grande valeur heuristique pour la sémiotique culturelle.

**Mots-clés :** Sémiotique; économie; F. de Saussure; commodité; signe; signifiant; signifié

WINFRIED NÖTH, professor in Linguistics and Semiotics, Director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Cultural Studies of the University of Kassel until 2009, at Wisconsin U. (1985-86) and Humboldt U., Berlin (2015-16), has been a professor in Cognitive Semiotics at Catholic U. São Paulo (PUC) since 2010. Nöth is an honorary member of the Int. Ass. for Visual Semiotics and for Edusemiotics. Major book publications : *Strukturen des Happenings*, *Origins of Semiosis*, *Semiotics of the Media*, *Handbook of Semiotics*, *Crisis of Representation*, *Comunicação e semiótica*, *Self-Reference in the Media*, *Estratégias semióticas da publicidade*, *Semiotic Theory of Learning*. 400 papers mainly on general semiotics, cognitive semiotics, visual semiotics, and Charles S. Peirce.