

# Metaphors, analogies, and comparisons in the tormented mind of Ferdinand de Saussure

Gustavo Augusto Fonseca Silva<sup>1</sup>

“[...] we are quite convinced that whoever enters the realm of language may as well abandon all hope of finding a fitting analogy, earthly or otherwise.” (Saussure 2006: 154)

“Language [is] an object beyond all comparison and unclassified be it in the mind of linguists or the mind of philosophers.” (Saussure 2006: 183)

**Abstract:** This article investigates the uses that Ferdinand de Saussure made of metaphors, analogies, and comparisons both in the manuscripts collected in the *Writings in General Linguistics* and in the *Course in General Linguistics*. The aim is to show that, more than the erasures and gaps in the manuscripts, it is the images and figures that Saussure employs in his texts that reveal his doubts and hesitations in the pursuit of a theory of general linguistics. With this reanalysis of the analogies, metaphors, and comparisons made by Saussure, the intention is to cast a new light not only on his legacy but also on the fact that he did not publish the results of his reflections on language.

**Keywords:** Ferdinand de Saussure. Search for a general linguistics theory. Metaphors, analogies, and comparisons in the *Course in General Linguistics* and in the *Writings in General Linguistics*.

## 1 Introduction

The discovery of unpublished manuscripts by Ferdinand de Saussure in 1996 in an annex of his residence in Geneva generated expectations among researchers of his work that these texts would finally reveal the true content of his linguistic ideas and thus resolve many of the controversies regarding his thought. However, almost 30 years later, what we see is that instead of helping to solve the major exegetical problems of

---

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this article was written in Portuguese and published in *Cadernos de Estudos Linguísticos* 60, 709-722, 2018. E-mail: fonsecaugusto@hotmail.com

the *Course in General Linguistics*, the manuscripts themselves have become a source of conflict among Saussureans, making it difficult to find even a minimum consensus in their analyses regarding the legacy of the one considered the founder of modern linguistics. Among the controversies raised by the manuscripts, one is particularly important because it concerns whether they invalidate the *Course in General Linguistics* as a work of Saussure. In the opinion of Simon Bouquet, who organized and edited the manuscripts with Rudolf Engler, publishing them in 2002 in the *Writings in General Linguistics*, the answer is affirmative. In his 1997 book *Introduction à la lecture de Saussure*, Bouquet argued that the organizers of the *Course*, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, distorted Saussure's thought, giving it a ready, finished character, when in fact the manuscripts reveal an author beset by doubts, anguished in the face of problems for which he had no answers. At least, not answers that fully satisfied him.

When it comes to the fact that Bally and Sechehaye erased the many hesitations and insecurities of Saussure regarding numerous linguistic and epistemological issues from the *Course in General Linguistics*, it is hard to disagree with Bouquet's position not only in light of the new manuscripts but also considering previously published manuscripts, especially in the classic works of Robert Godel (1957), Tullio de Mauro (1972), and Engler (1968, 1974). As for Bouquet's view that the *Course* is an apocryphal text that distances the reader from the true Saussure, and that it is therefore advisable to set it aside and rely solely on the texts written by Saussure himself, the opinion of Saussurean scholars who consider this stance to be exaggerated seems sensible (e.g., Engler 2004; Normand 2000; Pereira de Castro 2016). Thus, as Carlos Alberto Faraco (2016a: 20) rightly observed, "we are now reaching a point of balance: still reading the *Course* [...], but in contrast, in confrontation and in dialogue with the manuscripts."<sup>2</sup>

In this article, characteristic of this new moment in the study of Saussure, the use of metaphors, analogies, and comparisons is reanalyzed both in the manuscripts gathered in the *Writings in General Linguistics* and in the *Course in General Linguistics* – and, like Claudine Normand (2000), I will continue, according to tradition, to consider

---

<sup>2</sup> "[...] vamos atingindo agora um ponto de equilíbrio: ler ainda o *CLG* [...], mas em contraste, em confronto e em diálogo com os manuscritos."

it a book by Saussure. This reanalysis aims to make explicit the fact that, more than the erasures and gaps in the manuscripts – as argued, for example, by Eliane Silveira (2007) – it is the images, the figures that Saussure resorts to that reveal his doubts and hesitations in the search for a theory of general linguistics. Precisely for this reason, the investigation of the images, the figures, and the analogies made by Saussure is of the utmost importance for understanding his thought because it is they that signal his theoretical uncertainties; it is they that illuminate for the reader the ‘tortured path followed by Saussure’<sup>3</sup> (Silveira 2007: 112).

## 2 The interplay of signs called langue

The claim that it is the images, figures, and analogies made by Saussure that indicate his hesitations when reflecting on ‘the interplay of signs called langue’ (Saussure 2006: 21) is supported by the fragment entitled “On the Difficulties of Terminology: ‘No More Figures!’,” published by Engler (1968, 1974) and reprinted in the *Writings in General Linguistics*. In it, Saussure emphasized:

No more figures of speech! And therefore nothing but expressions reflecting the absolute realities of language? [...]

No more figures of speech! It’s a nice idea, set down on paper in no time. So what is needed to put this precept into practice? Very little; simply an insistence on expressions reflecting the absolute realities of language, classified in an infallible manner. [...]

To banish the figure one must be convinced one has access to the whole truth, otherwise one is radically unfit to say where a metaphor begins and ends. [...]

[...] No more figures? And therefore nothing but expressions reflecting the absolute realities of language? This is like saying that the absolute

---

<sup>3</sup> “[...] torturado caminho seguido por Saussure.”

realities of language held no mysteries for the Neogrammarians, and that they have unveiled them for us. (Saussure 2006: 165)

In a note at the end of the first chapter of the *Course*, the same criticism is made of the program to proscribe figures, albeit in a less categorical manner:

The new school, using a more realistic approach than had its predecessor, fought the terminology of the comparative school, and especially the illogical metaphors that it used. One no longer dared to say, “Language does this or that,” or “life of language,” etc. since language is not an entity and exists only within speakers. One must not go too far, however, and a compromise is in order. Certain metaphors are indispensable. To require that only words that correspond to the facts of speech be used is to pretend that these facts no longer perplex us. This is by no means true, and in some instances I shall not hesitate to use one of the expressions condemned at that time. (Saussure 1959: 5)

In fact, expressions that were disapproved by the neogrammarians were used both in the *Course* and in the manuscripts, with the proper exception of expressions like ‘Language does this or that’ or ‘life of language,’ used by comparatists like August Schleicher and Max Müller, who viewed languages as organisms that are born, grow, wither, and die, rather than as social institutions. But Saussure did not adhere to old expressions. Aware that he was ignorant of the ‘absolute realities of language’ and that he could not classify them infallibly, Saussure also created expressions and images to clarify the aspects of language that were most obscure to him. Furthermore, he made use of countless comparisons for the same purpose. Among them, of course, is the comparison between language and the game of chess.

This comparison is made in the *Course* for the first time in the fifth chapter of the Introduction, “Internal and External Elements of Language,” with the intention of

better understanding the differences between external linguistics and internal linguistics: ‘In chess, what is external can be separated relatively easily from what is internal. The fact that the game passed from Persia to Europe is external; against that, everything having to do with its system and rules is internal’ (Saussure 1959: 22). According to Saussure (1959: 20), his definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its ‘organism’<sup>4</sup> or ‘system’ – i.e., of everything known as external linguistics: the relationships between the history of a language and that of a civilization; the relationships between the language and political history, etc. Aware that he did not have ‘access to the whole truth’ of such an elimination, which is not easy at all, Saussure resorts to the analogy between language and the game of chess to clarify his position, since in that game it is much simpler to distinguish the external from the internal.

Further ahead, in § 4 of the third chapter of the first part of the *Course*, Saussure compared the autonomy of synchrony to the projection of an object on a plane surface and language to the stem of a plant. His goal in doing so was to illustrate the difference between the synchronic order and the diachronic order of language, which he claimed to be ‘a mechanism that continues to function in spite of the deteriorations to which it is subjected’ (Saussure 1959: 87). No comparison, however, in Saussure’s opinion, is more demonstrative of such a difference than that between the game of language and a game of chess, to which he once again referred (Saussure 1959: 88) to clarify his position, because he also did not have ‘access to the whole truth’ about the difference between the synchronic order and the diachronic order of language. Symptomatically, further on, in the first chapter of the second part of the *Course*, “Synchronic Linguistics,” Saussure stated that ‘the study of static linguistics is generally much more difficult than the study of historical linguistics’ because ‘evolutionary facts are more concrete and striking; their observable relations tie together successive terms that are easily grasped; it is easy, often even amusing, to follow a series of changes’ (Saussure 1959: 101). Not by chance, in the following chapter, “The Concrete Entities of Language,” Saussure again resorted to the analogy between language and the game of chess in order to understand such entities. And in the third chapter of the second part of

---

<sup>4</sup> It should be emphasized that one of the expressions of comparatists, which were rejected by the neogrammarians, is used here in the *Course*, but the analogy between language and an organism has not been taken to its ultimate consequences, as Schleicher, Müller, and Hovelacque did, whom Saussure vehemently criticizes (cf., e.g., Saussure 2006: 102, 150).

the *Course*, “Identities, Realities, Values,” Saussure used the same analogy to understand how values are established in the linguistic system.

It is well-known that, in several other points of the *Course*, Saussure also made use of the analogy between language and chess, stating, for example, that the values of both the pieces in a chess game and the terms of a language ‘depend above all else on an unchangeable convention, the set of rules that exists before a game begins and persists after each move’ (Saussure 1959: 88). More importantly, however, than presenting an exhaustive list of the already known points where Saussure compared language to a game of chess is the observation that the many other comparisons established by Saussure in the *Course* and the manuscripts serve the same purpose: to try to clarify the ‘absolute realities of language.’ A purpose to which Saussure dedicated himself obstinately for decades, despite being convinced that language is not ‘something simple’ or ‘something whose nature the mind can grasp directly’ (Saussure 2006: 154).

### **3 In search of the absolute realities of language**

In his first lecture at the University of Geneva, in November 1891, Saussure declared to the audience: ‘There is no object wholly comparable to the highly complex entity which is language; that is why all the comparisons and analogies which we like to use generally end up giving us a false idea in some way’ (Saussure 2006: 99–100). However, no resource was used more by Saussure in his hopeless attempt to capture language than comparisons and images. This fact is proved by both the *Course* and the manuscripts, which are permeated by metaphors, analogies, and the most diverse comparisons, relating to the most different aspects of language. Among the texts discovered in 1996 and gathered under the heading “On the Dual Essence of Language,” there are, for example, the comparison between a vocal figure and a piece of fabric that becomes a signal on a ship; the comparison between the language system and a system of maritime signals obtained through flags of various colors, and the frequent comparison between language and a game of chess. In the texts gathered in the section “Early Documents,” we see Saussure comparing, for example, language to the great moraines of glaciers; the succession of Latin by French to a very long street that could

be given a single name or several names for its portions; and related languages to diverging glaciers. In the fourth chapter of the Introduction to the *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure not only compared language to a symphony, but also stated that ‘language exists in the form of a sum of impressions deposited in the brain of each member of a community, almost like a dictionary of which identical copies have been distributed to each individual (Saussure 1959: 19). In the following chapter, Saussure compared language once again to a game of chess, and he did so in other parts of the book as well, such as in the third chapter of the “General Principles” and in the second chapter of the section “Synchronic Linguistics.”

This small list of images and comparisons found in the manuscripts and in the *Course*, by itself, seems enough to discredit the position defended by Bouquet (1997: 75) that Saussure’s reflection on a reform of the theoretical foundations of linguistics is largely able to abandon images and neologisms. In fact, Saussure’s reflection on the reform of the theoretical foundations of linguistics is based on images and comparisons, in addition to being punctuated by neologisms. Right at the beginning of the section “On the Dual Essence of Language,” for example, Saussure used comparisons in an attempt to understand what constitutes a linguistic entity and to explain why the task imposed on the linguist to grasp these entities is so arduous. According to Saussure, a linguistic entity implies the association of two heterogeneous elements: an idea, which is psychological, and a form, which is physical. For Saussure, it is precisely due to the heterogeneity of the constituent elements of linguistic entities that it is difficult to understand their nature. In order to clarify this obstacle that linguists face, Saussure noted that we would find it easy to determine the chemical species of a bar of iron, gold, or copper, as well as to determine the zoological species of a horse, a cow, or a sheep, but we would find it anything but easy to determine the ‘species’ of the odd combination of an iron plaque attached to a horse, a gold plate on a cow, or a sheep adorned with something copper. After all, in this second case, it involves the association of two heterogeneous elements. ‘The linguist has to realize that it is precisely this absurd task that faces him right from the very outset,’ Saussure observed (2006: 3). The linguist, Saussure completed (2006: 3), is unaware of the formal object of his study and of his classifications, that is, the point of connection between those two domains. To reinforce his position, Saussure pondered that linguistic entities are not comparable to a

simple chemical body or a chemical combination, but are comparable to a chemical mixture like the mixture of nitrogen and oxygen in the air, since air is no longer air without one element or the other, but they are independent of each other. Further ahead, Saussure revisited the two domains of the formal object of linguistic studies, presenting new difficulties regarding this issue:

Langue has a physical side and a psychological side. But the unforgivable error which is found in every paragraph of the grammars is the belief that the psychological side is the idea, while the physical side is the sound, the form, the word. Things are rather more complicated than that. It is not true, indeed it is extremely false to imagine there to be a distinction between the sound and the idea. These are in fact inseparably one in our minds. The distinction... Thus we have on one side a word (physical entity), on the other its meaning (psychological entity). Langue has a physical side and a psychological side. For students of language the meaning of this common sense truth has to be perfectly clear: otherwise there is no way of knowing what belongs in the physical domain and what belongs in the psychological domain. The traditional, straightforward distinction is perfectly disastrous, for it eliminates any hope of rational study of language by presuming that the psychological side is simply the IDEA or signification, while the physical side is the sound, the form, the word. Things are rather more complicated than that. (Saussure 2006: 40)

In one of the manuscripts discovered in 1996 that were gathered in “Miscellany and Aphorisms,” Saussure once again stated that the linguist ignores the junction point of the two domains of the formal object of his study and classifications:

The one *a priori* truth whose validity rests on simple common sense is that while there may be psychological facts, and while there may be

phonological facts, neither of the two series alone would ever be capable of giving rise to any linguistic fact whatsoever.

For there to be a linguistic fact, the two series must exist in union, but in a union of a special kind – any cursory explanation of its characteristics, however, would be totally in vain, as would any prediction as to what it will be. (Saussure 2006: 67)

Contradicting himself, however, Saussure tried to explore the union of the psychological and phonological series by resorting to the analogy of a sheet of paper:

When one considers the ‘sign,’ and imagines quite wrongly that it may easily be separated from ‘signification,’ that ‘sign’ refers only to the ‘material part,’ one would be better informed simply by accepting that the sign has a material limit, as its fundamental law, and that this limit is in itself ‘a sign,’ bearing signification. It is thus always quite vain to oppose sign and meaning. They are two forms of the same mental concept; signification would not exist without the sign, and constitutes an inverted experience of the sign, just as one cannot cut a sheet of paper without making an incision on both front and back, with the same movement of the scissors. (Saussure 2006: 66)

In the *Course*, the entire second chapter of the second part, “The Concrete Entities of Language,” is dedicated to the issue of the two domains of the sign, already referred to as signifier and signified. Given the difficulty of the theme, Saussure once again turned to the comparison between this unit of two faces and a chemical compound, after dismissing the comparison between the linguistic entity and the unit of the human person, composed of soul and body, as unsatisfactory: ‘A better choice would be a chemical compound like water, a combination of hydrogen and oxygen; taken separately, neither element has any of the properties of water’ (Saussure 1959: 103). Following that, Saussure also dismissed the comparison between linguistic signs

and visual signs, since the latter are material and coexist in visual space without merging, while the former are abstract and need to be identified in the mind of the speaking subject through the junction of the phonetic aspect (signifier) and the significative aspect (signified):

When we hear an unfamiliar language, we are at a loss to say how the succession of sounds should be analyzed, for analysis is impossible if only the phonic side of the linguistic phenomenon is considered. But when we know the meaning and function that must be attributed to each part of the chain, we see the parts detach themselves from each other and the shapeless ribbon break into segments. Yet there is nothing material in the analysis. (Saussure 1959: 103–104)

Based on these considerations, Saussure defined the linguistic unit as ‘a slice of sound which to the exclusion of everything that precedes and follows it in the spoken chain is the signifier of a certain concept’ (Saussure 1959: 104). However, this is a very vague definition, which does not help the linguist to delimit linguistic units, as can be inferred from the delimitation method presented in § 2 of the same second chapter of the second part of the *Course* and the practical difficulties of delimitation detailed in § 3. Not coincidentally, at the end of the chapter, Saussure again compared language to a game of chess, pondering: ‘[...] just as the game of chess is entirely in the combination of the different chess pieces, language is characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units’ (Saussure 1959: 107). But he completed, aware that he still ignored what constitutes the formal object of his study and its classifications: ‘We can neither dispense with becoming acquainted with them nor take a single step without coming back to them; and still, delimiting them is such a delicate problem that we may wonder at first whether they really exist’ (Saussure 1959: 107).

#### **4 An unfinished theory**

In the next chapter of the *Course*, “Identities, Realities, Values,” Saussure turned to the investigation of these three concepts, directly dependent on the notion of unity, as he observed right in the first paragraph. After presenting the concept of ‘identity’ and explaining the difficulties of defining it, Saussure once again used comparisons to try to clarify it: he compared ‘identity’ to facts taken from outside speech, such as the identity of two “8:25 p.m. Geneva-to-Paris” trains that leave at twenty-four hour intervals; a street that is destroyed and rebuilt, with nothing material remaining from the old one; a suit that is stolen and found again in a store (Saussure 1959: 108–109). After making the comparisons, he stated: ‘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’ (Saussure 1959: 109). That is, elements which will point up the true nature of linguistic units, but without reaching it.

Regarding the concept of “reality,” Saussure drew attention to the fact that the traditional classification of words into nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc., is not obvious at all, since it is not clear which concrete or abstract elements of language can be called synchronic realities. In view of this theoretical obstacle, Saussure stated: ‘Linguistics [...] works continuously with concepts forged by grammarians without knowing whether or not the concepts actually correspond to the constituents of the system of language. But how can we find out? And if they are phantoms, what realities can we place in opposition to them? (Saussure 1959: 110). Without presenting a solution to the problem, Saussure moved on to the notion of “value,” which ‘envelopes the notions of unit, concrete entity, and reality’ (Saussure 1959: 110). In fact, to Saussure (1959: 111), ‘it is better to approach the problem of units through the study of value, for [...] value is of prime importance.’ To explain the concept of “value” – on which he had been reflecting since the end of the 19th century, as evidenced by some of his manuscripts (cf. Saussure 2006: 9ss) – Saussure (1959: 110) once again used the comparison between language and the game of chess, emphasizing that the value of a concrete entity is not in its materiality, just as the value of the knight in chess is independent of the piece itself.

Later, in the chapter “Linguistic Value,” Saussure started from the observation that language is a system of values composed of ideas and sounds to revisit the issue of the conjunction of these two heterogeneous elements, drawing attention to the

‘somewhat mysterious fact’ that “‘thought-sound” implies division, and that language works out its units while taking shape between two shapeless masses’ (Saussure 1959: 112). Without access to the whole truth, Saussure immediately used a comparison to try to get closer to it: ‘Visualize the air in contact with a sheet of water; if the atmospheric pressure changes, the surface of the water will be broken up into a series of divisions, waves; the waves resemble the union or coupling of thought with phonic substance’ (Saussure 1959: 112). Not satisfied, Saussure (1959: 113) also revisited the comparison between language and a sheet of paper to try to clarify the connection between ideas and sounds.

Later on, after again recognizing that he could not directly capture the concrete entities or units of language, Saussure chose words as his object of study, believing that they provide an approximate idea of what a linguistic unit is. Having done this, he began to show the differences between value and signification, arguing that the two concepts are not synonymous. According to Saussure (1959: 115), values are always composed (1) of a *dissimilar* thing that can be *exchanged* for the thing whose value is to be determined and (2) of *similar* things that can be compared with the thing whose value is to be determined. Trying to make himself understood, Saussure presented yet another comparison:

To determine what a five-franc piece is worth one must therefore know (1) that it can be exchanged for a fixed quantity of a different thing, e.g. bread; and (2) 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.). 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. (Saussure 1959: 115)

Next, Saussure (1959: 115–116) listed examples to illustrate his point of view, starting with the contrast between the French “mouton” and the English “sheep,” which have the same meaning but not the same value, since when referring to the meat served at the table, the English say “mutton,” not “sheep,” while the French use the same term

to refer to both the animal and the meat to be eaten. Not limiting himself to words, Saussure also cited examples related to the value of plural and inflection in different languages, concluding that, instead of predefined ideas, it is values that emanate from the system. Thus, ‘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’ (Saussure 1959: 117).

At the end of the chapter, Saussure (1959: 122) revisited the concept of unity, stating that what is true of value is also true of unity. Furthermore, he claimed that what is referred to as “grammatical fact” fits the definition of unity since it expresses an opposition of terms. To illustrate his argument, Saussure cited the formation of the German plural of the type *Nacht: Nächte*. According to Saussure, these terms, taken in isolation, are nothing, which shows that everything is opposition. In an attempt to clarify himself further, Saussure made another comparison. ‘[...] the *Nacht: Nächte* relation can be expressed by an algebraic formula  $a/b$  in which  $a$  and  $b$  are not simple terms but result from a set of relations. Language, in a manner of speaking, is a type of algebra consisting solely of complex terms’ (Saussure 1959: 122).

In the following chapter, “Syntagmatic and Associative Relations,” Saussure not only continued to employ the concept of unity, but he also used another comparison to try to explain it, shortly after presenting the concepts of syntagm and associative relations:

[...] a linguistic unit is like a fixed part of a building, e.g. a column. On the one hand, the column has a certain relation to the architrave that it supports; the arrangement of the two units in space suggests the syntagmatic relation. On the other hand, if the column is Doric, it suggests a mental comparison of this style with others (Ionic, Corinthian, etc.) although none of these elements is present in space: the relation is associative. (Saussure 1959: 123–124)

In the sixth chapter of the second part of the *Course*, “The Mechanism of Language,” Saussure concluded, based on syntagmatic and associative relations, that ‘in language everything boils down to differences but also to groupings’ (Saussure 1959: 128). To clarify his statement, Saussure formulated another comparison: ‘The mechanism of language, which consists of the interplay of successive terms, resembles the operation of a machine in which the parts have a reciprocating function even though they are arranged in a single dimension’ (Saussure 1959: 128). This is, of course, a comparison with which Saussure sheds light on one of the multiple aspects of language, being aware that ‘nowhere do we find the integral object of linguistics’ (Saussure 1959: 9). Furthermore, being mindful of the fact that speech is ‘an existing institution and a product of the past’ (Saussure 1959: 9), Saussure would resort to other comparisons to illuminate this other aspect of the object of linguistics.

In the third chapter of the “General Principles” of the *Course*, Saussure proposed dividing linguistics into two parts precisely because of the duality of language, which he defined as ‘a mechanism that continues to function in spite of the deteriorations to which it is subjected’ (Saussure 1959: 87): an evolutionary linguistics and a static linguistics, also known as diachronic linguistics and synchronic linguistics. According to Saussure, everything that relates to the static side of language is synchronic, and everything that relates to its evolutionary side is diachronic, that is, ‘*synchrony* and *diachrony* designate respectively a language-state and an evolutionary phase’ (Saussure 1959: 81). To better justify this division of the linguist’s work, Saussure used another geological comparison:

The first thing that strikes us when we study the facts of language is that their succession in time does not exist insofar as the speaker is concerned. He is confronted with a state. That is why the linguist who wishes to understand a state must discard all knowledge of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony. He can enter the mind of speakers only by completely suppressing the past. The intervention of history can only falsify his judgment. It would be absurd to attempt to sketch a panorama of the Alps by viewing them simultaneously from

several peaks of the Jura; a panorama must be made from a single vantage point. The same applies to language; the linguist can neither describe it nor draw up standards of usage except by concentrating on one state. When he follows the evolution of the language, he resembles the moving observer who goes from one peak of the Jura to another in order to record the shifts in perspective. (Saussure 1959: 81–82)

To explain the concept of a state of language, Saussure compared language to a game of chess, observing that ‘a state of the set of chessmen corresponds closely to a state of language’ (Saussure 1959: 88). But what is, in fact, a state of language? And how can such states be delineated? In his third lecture at the University of Geneva, in November 1891, Saussure outlined the difficulty of answering these questions, which would occupy him for the rest of his life:

[...] there are only states of language that are which reflect the continual transition from yesterday’s state to tomorrow’s state; wishing to bring together a certain number of these states under a name like Latin or French is about as useless as the distinction between the nineteenth century and the eighteenth century or the twelfth. These are loose markers, which do not aspire to represent a final state of affairs, and still less to assert that the preceding and following orders demonstrated any noticeably different characteristics. (Saussure 2006: 110)

Having failed to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of determining language states, Saussure limited himself in the *Course* to presenting vague characterizations of this concept, stating, for example, that ‘a language-state is not a point but rather a certain span of time during which the sum of the modifications that have supervened is minimal. The span may cover ten years, a generation, a century, or

even more' (Saussure 1959: 101). Unsurprisingly, Saussure also made use of a comparison to try to grasp the concept of a language state, saying that 'studying a language-state means in practice disregarding changes of little importance, just as mathematicians disregard infinitesimal quantities in certain calculations, such as logarithms' (Saussure 1959: 102). Given this condition to study a state of language, Saussure admitted: 'A concept of a language-state can be only approximate. In static linguistics, as in most sciences, no course of reasoning is possible without the usual simplification of data' (Saussure 1959: 102). Nothing indicates, however, that Saussure was satisfied with this makeshift solution to the fundamental problem of determining language states. Nor is there any evidence that Saussure was content to work with simplified data, even though this is common practice in most sciences. Even less is there evidence that Saussure was convinced he had developed a theory of general linguistics, as Loïc Depecker (2009) believes. More precisely, Depecker became convinced, based on his reading of the manuscripts, that such a theory appears there in all its coherence without Saussure being able to present it in a finished book. In reality, what is found are testimonies of Saussure's anguish, already at the end of his life, in the face of the dead ends he encountered in his reflections on language. Among these testimonies, none is as eloquent – nor as frequently cited – as that of Léopold Gautier, one of the students in the last course of general linguistics taught by Saussure, who recorded a private conversation with the professor, dated May 6, 1911, in which Saussure confided to him:

I find myself faced with a dilemma: either to present the subject in all its complexity and admit all my doubts, which would not be suitable for a course that is meant to be a subject for examination. Or to do something simplified, better suited to an audience of students who are not linguists. But with every step, I am halted by scruples. (Gautier 2005: 69)<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Je me trouve placé devant un dilemme: ou bien exposer le sujet dans toute sa complexité et avouer tous mes doutes, ce qui ne peut convenir pour un cours qui doit être matière à examen. Ou bien faire quelque chose de simplifié, mieux adapté à un auditoire d'étudiants qui ne sont pas linguistes. Mais à chaque pas je me trouve arrêté par des scrupules.'

In this way, as Paul Bouissac (2010: 116) emphasized, we must keep in mind that Saussure refused to publish anything related to general linguistics, as he was convinced that he had not reached the point where he felt confident that such a publication was possible. In fact, as Bouissac pointed out, Saussure insisted that many problems remained unsolved and, therefore, the only thing he was sure of was that anything that had been published up until then about general linguistics was of little value. Saussure expressed this opinion very clearly in his “Notes for a Book on General Linguistics:”

[...] for us linguistics is not a science in which there is a solid dividing principle, but, one or two reservations apart, a science which tries to bring together in a single whole two objects which have in principle always been totally disparate, by convincing itself that they form a single object. The worst thing is that our science makes do with this association seems untroubled by any vague feeling that there is something false in its very basis; shows no illeasy at the most oblique notions it is constantly accepting, indeed feels master of its object to the degree that it has no trouble occasionally extracting theories of language from this conceptual confusion, and presenting them in all seriousness. (Saussure 2006: 159)

Thus, as Normand (2000) argued, more than a deep questioning of the *Course*, reading the manuscripts, with their hesitations, erasures, repetitions, and silences, forces one to give up the image of a finished theory, which is actually the impression that could be drawn from reading the *Course* itself. Thus, as Normand (2000) argued, more than a deep questioning of the *Course*, reading the manuscripts, with their hesitations, erasures, repetitions, and silences, forces one to give up the image of a finished theory. This, however, as Normand (2000) pointed out, is the impression one could take from reading the *Course* itself. Indeed, what emerges from the reading of both the *Course* and the manuscripts – including the preparatory notes for the general linguistics courses – is ‘an unfinished, tormented thought, in which the boundaries are marked not without

a certain degree of hesitation'<sup>6</sup> (Cruz 2016: 48). A greater evidence of this is the constant use that Saussure makes of images and comparisons trying to approach the 'absolute realities of language' (Saussure 2006: 165), with its 'annoying duality which always prevents it from being grasped' (Saussure 2006: 151).

## 5 A disconcerting verdict

In 1916, the year of the posthumous publication of the *Course*, Gautier remembered his deceased professor as a 'distinguished aging gentleman, looking tired and dreamy, with a touch of anxious sadness and perplexity' (Bouissac 2010: 35). If one does not have this impression of Saussure while reading the *Course*, no other arises from reading his manuscripts, in which the 'painful hesitations of Saussure's reflection' overflow (Arrivé 2010 [2007]: 51). Among the first texts gathered under the title "On the Dual Essence of Language," for example, there is a fragment entitled "Four Points of View." In it, Saussure (2006: 7) outlined what he considered the four only legitimate points of view of language: (1) the synchronic point of view; (2) the diachronic point of view; (3) the anachronic point of view – i.e., the etymological point of view; and (4) the historical point of view of fixing two successive states of language, taken each in itself, first, and without subordination of one to the other, followed by an explanation. Having made this categorization of language, Saussure lamented the fact that his colleagues focused almost exclusively on the second and third points of view, with a lack of reflection from the authors regarding the other points of view. To change this situation, Saussure would devote himself intensely for decades to legitimizing the synchronic study of language alongside the diachronic study, even though he was painfully aware of the quixotic nature of his project:

But let us be clear: however much we are convinced, rightly or wrongly, that in the end it will be necessary to bring everything down

---

<sup>6</sup> "um pensamento inacabado, atormentado, em que as fronteiras são demarcadas não sem certo grau de hesitação."

theoretically to the four valid points of view that we have justified, which in turn rest on the two necessary points of view of the synchronic and diachronic, nevertheless we are in some doubt about whether it will ever be possible to establish precisely the fourfold or even twofold terminology that this requires. (Saussure 2006: 7)

The effect of this verdict on Saussure's work is absolutely disconcerting. On one hand, the certainty of failure did not prevent him from continuing to seek a general theory of linguistics, but on the other hand, such certainty made it impossible for him to carry out the great work of his life.

## **6 Conclusion**

In this article, I investigated some of the recurring uses of metaphors, analogies, and comparisons that Saussure made both in his manuscripts and in the *Course in General Linguistics*. My goal was to show how these resources signal the doubts, insecurities, and hesitations of the Geneva linguist in his disheartened search for a theory of general linguistics. At the end of this discussion, it can be stated with certainty that, although the analysis presented reiterates the criticism made by Bouquet to Bally and Sechehaye that both distorted Saussure's thought in the *Course* by giving it a ready-made and finished character, this same analysis also brings the Saussure author of the manuscripts closer to the Saussure of the *Course*, thus discrediting Bouquet's exhortation that the *Course* should be ignored by those interested in the true Saussurean ideas. This conclusion, of course, would not surprise those who read the *Course* in contrast, in confrontation, and in dialogue with the manuscripts. After all, as these readers could see, what such documents revealed – or rather, confirmed – was not the true ideas of Saussure, but rather the truly provisional, inconclusive nature of his reflections on language.

## References

- ARRIVÉ, Michel. *À la recherche de Ferdinand de Saussure*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007.
- ARRIVÉ, Michel. *Em busca de Ferdinand de Saussure*. São Paulo: Parábola, 2010.
- BOUISSAC, Paul. *Saussure: A guide for the perplexed*. London: A&C Black, 2010.
- BOUQUET, Simon. *Introduction à la lecture de Saussure*. Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 1997.
- CRUZ, Marcio Alexandre. Por que (não) ler o *Curso de linguística geral* depois de um século? In: FARACO, Carlos Alberto (Org.). *O efeito Saussure: cem anos do Curso de linguística geral*. São Paulo: Parábola, 2016, p. 25-48.
- CRUZ, M. A.; PIOVEZANI, Carlos; TESTENOIRE, Pierre-Yves (Orgs.). *Saussure, o texto e o discurso: cem anos de heranças e recepções*. São Paulo: Parábola, 2016.
- DEPECKER, Loïc. *Comprendre Saussure*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2009.
- ENGLER, Rudolf. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1968, t. I.
- ENGLER, Rudolf. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974, t. II.
- ENGLER, Rudolf. The making of the *Cours de linguistique générale*. In: SANDERS, C. (Org.). *Saussure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 47-58.
- FARACO, Carlos Alberto. Apresentação. In: FARACO, Carlos Alberto (Org.). *O efeito Saussure: cem anos do Curso de linguística geral*. São Paulo: Parábola, 2016a, 7-24.
- FARACO, Carlos Alberto (Org.). *O efeito Saussure: cem anos do Curso de linguística geral*. São Paulo: Parábola, 2016b.
- GAUTIER, Léopold. Entretien avec M. de Saussure, 6 mai 1911. *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, 58, 2005.
- GODEL, Robert. *Les sources manuscrites du Cours de linguistique générale de F. de Saussure*. Genebra: Librairie Droz, 1957.

MAURO, Tullio de. Notes. In: SAUSSURE, F. de. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1972.

NORMAND, Claudine. *Saussure*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2000.

PEREIRA DE CASTRO, Maria Faustina. Ler os manuscritos saussurianos com o *Curso de linguística geral*. In: FARACO, Carlos Alberto (Org.). *O efeito Saussure: cem anos do Curso de linguística geral*. São Paulo: Parábola, 2016, 49-71.

SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.

SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de. *Writings in General Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

SILVEIRA, Eliane. *As marcas do movimento de Saussure na fundação da linguística*. Campinas: Mercado das Letras, 2007.