II

The Science
of Language
2.1 The Wolf in Itself

The Uses of Enchantment in the Development of Modern Linguistics

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Weber’s antimodernism and Latour’s symmetrical anthropology

In the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences in which I work, the philosophers have no doubt that they are part of the humanities. The psychologists know that they are not; the borderline that matters for them is between the social sciences and medicine. We linguists straddle the humanities and social sciences. A few of us are comfortable on the fence, while others place themselves firmly on this side or that, and generally try to hide their contempt for those on the other.

This may be inevitable, given that language is itself so central both to humanistic studies and to social life. Or the seeming inevitability could be just an *ex post facto* rationalization. Either way, it is worth zeroing in on some key early moments when the study of language shifted from being firmly rooted in the humanities to staking a claim to be a science, first a natural science, then a social one – and in both cases, a modern one.

In 1917, Max Weber (1864-1920) lamented ‘the fate of our times, with their rationalization, intellectualization and above all, disenchantment of the world.’ This indictment of the modern condition was implicitly echoed 75 years later by Bruno Latour:

The antimoderns firmly believe that the West has rationalized and disenchanted the world, [...] that it has definitively transformed the premodern cosmos into a mechanical interaction of pure matters. But instead of seeing these processes as the modernizers do – as glorious, albeit painful, conquests – the antimoderns see the situation as an unparalleled catastrophe.
He adds that ‘The postmoderns, always perverse, accept the idea that the situation is indeed catastrophic, but they maintain that it is to be acclaimed rather than bemoaned!’\(^2\)

Latour argues that modernism, antimodernism and postmodernism are all equally grounded in a ‘Constitution’ which took shape in the seventeenth century, whereby Nature and Society were separated, then gradually made into irreconcilable opposites. By the early nineteenth century this Constitution had become impervious to criticism. It undid the premodern incapacity to tamper with either nature or society, each being conceived as inexorably bound to the other at every point, under the authority of God. But the new ‘humanism’ gave rise to an ‘asymmetry’, which Latour considers the true mark of the modern, and the source of its ultimately fatal contradictions. It is asymmetrical because

It overlooks the simultaneous birth of ‘nonhumanity’ – things, or objects, or beasts – and the equally strange beginning of a crossed-out God, relegated to the sidelines. Modernity arises first from the conjoined creation of those three entities, and then from the masking of the conjoined birth and the separate treatment of the three communities while, underneath, hybrids continue to multiply as an effect of this separate treatment.\(^3\)

Latour designates the ‘human’ pole as Subject/Society, as though these were conflatable, and repays his reader’s willing suspension of disbelief with a grand narrative of modernism as the proliferation of ‘hybrids’ which mediate between Nature and Subject/Society [Fig. 1].

The Constitution denies the existence, even the possibility, of such hybrids, being committed instead to ‘purifying’ the split. Yet this artificial split has to be mediated. So the Constitution ends up surreptitiously demanding the proliferation of those hybrids it claims to forbid. Such contradictions, far from weakening the Constitution, positioned the moderns as ‘invincible’:

If you criticize them by saying that Nature is a world constructed by human hands, they will show you that it is transcendent, that science is a mere intermediary allowing access to Nature, and that they keep their hands off. If you tell them that we are free and that our destiny is in our own hands, they will tell you that Society is transcendent and its laws infinitely surpass us.\(^4\)

Because we have never practiced the absolute separation which is preached, Latour says that we have never been modern. Hence the idea of a ‘postmodernism’ is as absurd as the thought of returning to premodernity. His prescription for a nonmodernism has had less impact than his diagnosis. I’ll return to it, but my
central aim is to apply his framework to a set of possibly related critical moments in the emergence of modern linguistics:

- The demise over the course of the nineteenth century of the ‘genius of a language’, a concept that had arisen two centuries earlier
- How sign theory relates to the linguistic system in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)
- Why and how the ‘social’ analysis of language failed to take off for decades after the early work of Saussure’s student Antoine Meillet (1866-1936)

The ‘genius of a language’ as natural and irrational

Applying Latour’s analysis to the post-Renaissance history of linguistics, we have little trouble finding dichotomies that mirror the polarization between Nature and Subject/Society. One powerful manifestation of the Nature pole was the ‘genius of a language’, a concept which arose precisely on schedule in the seventeenth century, in a discourse by Dominique Bouhours (1628-1702). But it was never confined to the Nature pole. Gambarota has chronicled how the genius of a language became a prominent trope in tandem with the modern conception of nationhood, and points to the ‘democratizing’ impact of this genius, in which all speakers of the language have a share. Until recent times only a small minority of any European country’s population spoke the ‘national language’; but just its presence as a written language, and an ideal hovering over dialect usage, drew
together everyone, not just the elite, into a shared national mind, its defining features matching those of the genius of its language.

It is a classic Latourian example of a superficially modern ‘natural’ concept that in fact is equally bound up with society and politics. Genius cannot be seen or heard – one can only proclaim particular textual manifestations as being its products. In being only indirectly accessible it is like the ‘language system’ as we have understood it since Saussure. What differentiates the genius of a language from a prototypical product of Nature is its mediation, not so much with Subject/Society, since all of Latour’s ‘nonhumans’ mediate between the two, as with the enchanted.

The naturalizing of the genius of a language was a crucial first step in establishing what we call ‘linguistics’, as opposed to the study of language that preceded it. Linguistics begins historically with the erasing of speaking-writing subjects and their willful utterances. The texts with which linguistics worked, and works, are mainly, and ideally, anonymous; if an author is named, we may still use the text, taking it as an expression of the genius of the race that speaks it. That somehow becomes easier the deeper we go into the past, perhaps because a name like Homer or Moses or Panini or Ossian seems as likely to be symbolic of a collective process – a community of practice – as denoting an individual like ourselves.

Language functions as rationality’s codification and embodiment, but also its vehicle, and the principal index for judging how rational a given individual is. In our culture, we judge no one as irrational for using language in an unschooled, natural way, except in a social context that demands that it be used in a standard, schooled way. Education is ‘prescriptivist’ about language, and prescriptivism is counternatural; it occupies the Society pole in Latour’s dichotomy, the Nature pole being that of the spontaneous speech that is more ‘native’ to us.

Modern linguistics has always refused to engage in prescriptive discourse. It anchors linguistic behavior to natural, physical causes which are always at present only partially understood, but ultimately certain to yield up their secrets. Why physical forces? Because modern views of rationality rest not just on the dyad of Nature and Society but also that of Body and Mind. Put them together, and the body becomes the locus of Nature, the mind that of Rational Subject–Society–God. The ‘mind’ of linguistics is not the mind of agentive choices, but of the genius of the language, the immutable Saussurean system, the Durkheimian collective consciousness, the Freudian unconscious, the Chomskyan mind/brain where the mind is (merely) what the brain does.

The commitment to forces that cannot (yet) be directly observed, just inferred from what are interpreted as their effects, is a matter of faith. As with religion, some people will say that to base one’s actions and commitments on faith rather than on what is directly observable is irrational; others that it is the only rational
Enchantment in the Development of Linguistics

course. Either way, the promise of unseen forces that pose puzzles for us, in the
solving of which we will come to uncover those deep, mysterious forces, provides
the enchantment of modern linguistics. Call it an enchanted rationality or irra-
tionality: no matter. Enchantment and disenchantment are many-sided concepts.
As a translation of Weber’s *Entzauberung*, disenchantment means ‘un-magicking’,
demystifying. Enchantment, however, does not have to mean mystifying, and it
has its uses, as shown by another Bruno – not Latour, but Bettelheim.9

Outside linguistics, language has its own powers to enchant, but they tend not
to be ones linguists want to deal with. They steer clear of anything ‘literary’; they
keep rhetoric out of bounds; they are even nervous of investigating too deeply
into what causes some words and structures to be perceived as good and others
as poor. These are just the things that matter in the general cultural discourse
about language, which locates rationality in agentive choices based on analytic
understanding. In order to have the status of a science, linguists seem to think
they must construct the opposite, mirror-image version of rationality from the
culture at large. They must become counterrational, refusing to deal with agen-
tive choices, and instead trying to expose heretofore unobservable natural forces
and the hidden rationality they project. That gives it a sort of cultishness that
enhances its enchantment.

Linguistics and the Nature vs. Subject/Society polarization

The 1860s saw a prominent debate between the Oxford scholar Friedrich Max Müll-
er (1823-1900) and the American William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894) over the
question of whether linguistics was a natural science or a historical one, a classic
version of Latour’s polarization.10 For Müller, seeing language as a natural phenom-
emon was the breakthrough that positioned linguistics at the center of the academic
universe. As understanding of language grew, it would provide the keys to unlock-
ing the secrets of the human mind and its evolution. A language was a living thing,
an organism, that grew following the same laws as other organisms, such as plants.

For Whitney, on the contrary, languages were human ‘institutions’. Language
had not grown organically out of the evolution of the vocal apparatus, as Müll-
er thought; rather, the vocal apparatus was chosen, by a combination of chance
and convenience – sign language could have developed equally well – and all
languages contain elements created by haphazard accident, and ratified through
an implicit democratic process among those in the community, who determine
which creations will be rejected and which retained.

The naturalist position of Max Müller had been formed through what Latour
calls a ‘purification’, in an attempt to position linguistics among the hard sciences
as their prestige was suddenly outstripping that of the law, theology and medicine faculties that had traditionally ruled the roost in universities. Whitney, in response, was undertaking a ‘hybridization’, not denying that language has natural aspects, but rather denying that the natural aspects are primary, and the institutional ones secondary, instead of the reverse.

Saussure wrote that he ‘revered’ Whitney, whom he first read as a student of Neogrammian historical linguistics at the University of Leipzig. Yet it gradually became clear to Saussure that Whitney’s characterization of a language as an ‘institution’ had a flaw. Institutions are planned, designed, changed through decisions taken by powerful individuals, none of which is true of a language. On the Nature–Subject/Society scale, Saussure was a bit to the left of Whitney, though much closer to him than to Müller.

Whitney’s institutional conception of language was appealing because of its modernity, as it rejected the irrational dimension of linguistic naturalism. And yet, in a period when science had been constitutionally soldered to the Nature pole, and was increasingly dominant in terms of academic prestige, the claim of linguistics to be a science meant that its precise position was a delicate matter indeed. The Neogrammarians’ claim to scientific status was tied to their conception of sound change as mechanical, which is not the same as natural, but somewhere between it and the other end of the spectrum, where the Social clearly mitigates between it and the individual Subject.

By the last decades of the nineteenth century the Enlightenment of a hundred years earlier, while respected, was viewed not as enduring but surpassed. The problem with its approach to language according to Michel Bréal (1832-1915) in his Essai de sémantique (1897), is that

Our forefathers of the school of Condillac, those ideologists who for fifty years served as target to a certain school of criticism, were less far from the truth when they said, in simple and honest fashion, that words are signs. Where they went wrong was when they referred everything to a reasoning reason.12

Bréal’s condescension toward these ‘forefathers’ is thick. Their ‘reasoning reason’ (raison raisonnante) seems a redundant phrase, but is not, for a reason that has to do with the Subject/Society division. There is a reason, a logic, behind every language, but not the reasoning of a willful Subject. It is a social reason, a shared choice that is not chosen but emerges.

That is Saussure’s view as well. But Saussure had something in his Genevese educational formation that his French colleagues did not: the grammaire générale tradition. Dating from the seventeenth century, it had, on account of historical
accidents, endured in Geneva down to the early 1870s, forty years longer than in France itself. Saussure had been in one of the last cohorts to have been taught by old men whose courses in logic included general grammar, part of which was the theory of the linguistic sign as the linkage of sound and thought. In the wake of a two-hundred-year discourse about the genius of a language, they were no longer distinguishing sharply between a ‘general’ grammar and ‘particular’ grammars, nor were they inclined to assume that universal rationality was equally well embodied in all languages. They did though continue to take language itself as inseparable from rationality.¹³

Reason, genius and related concepts were hybrids in Latour’s terms. Saussure could not accept the naturalists’ conception of language because of the purification it represented. Linguistics would, for him, have to be a double science, in order to take account of what was in so many respects the dual nature of language: langue and parole, synchrony and diachrony, absolute and relative arbitrariness, mutability and immutability. Neogrammarian doctrine held that phonetic laws operate blindly, with analogy the only explanation permitted for any seeming exceptions. Analogy is a form of reasoning, and it imposes itself on the automatic, instinctive operation of the vocal organs by which sound change is introduced. Those operations are either irrational or rational in a different way from the process of analogy – which itself is still not what Bréal called ‘reasoning reason’, the rationality of an agentive Subject.

In some of Saussure’s last lectures on general linguistics in 1911, he addressed this dual nature head-on. Languages, he said, appear to offer their users a choice, but it is like a forced card, la carte forcée.¹⁴ This is a conjuror’s trick, you fan out a deck of cards and tell an audience member to choose one. As his fingers approach you push out the card you, the conjuror, want chosen, the tiniest fraction of a centimeter, imperceptibly to the audience member’s awareness, which you distract by a movement of your free hand. Nearly always the forced card is chosen, though the audience member thinks he has chosen freely.

 Conjuring is an interesting form of entertainment. It is a reintroduction of enchantment into our modern rational world, where its reception is different from what it would be in a premodern setting. It reassures us that all enchantment is not in fact vanished, that it is possible even for arch-materialists to experience an amazement akin to a religious experience. Saussure’s lectures were – are – themselves enchanting, not least because of the way in which he presents us with paradoxes that are left unresolved, and occasionally an image as powerful as that of the forced card.

That image comes in a discussion of what he terms ‘immutability’. On the one hand, language is pervasively mutable, in the sense that all its elements are constantly subject to change. On the other hand, a language is immutable, in that no
individual can dictate any change to it. Every change begins with an innovation by an individual within speech (parole), but most such innovations are not taken up by the community. Only a very few are socially sanctioned, and it is that sanction that allows a change from parole into the langue — though, since every element of the language system derives its value from its difference vis-à-vis all the other elements, any such change actually brings about a wholly new langue.

The evolution of Meillet

There is here a force beyond not only human control, but beyond reason. It is not natural, since the elements of language are themselves not naturally determined, but arbitrary. Saussure falls back on the explanation that ‘language is a social fact’ — quoting an article by his former student, Meillet, in the 1904/1905 volume of the Année sociologique, founded and edited by Émile Durkheim (1858-1917). In this period we find Meillet taking pains to stay in line with Durkheim’s sociology.

In the same lectures in which he talked about immutability and the forced card, Saussure revisited the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, introduced in an earlier lecture, to point out that such arbitrariness was in fact limited. He noted that the evolution from Latin to French saw ‘an enormous shift toward the unmotivated’. For example, ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ in Latin were the transparently related amicus and inimicus; but the French counterparts ami and ennemi are not perceived as related by French speakers. Ennemi ‘has gone back to being absolutely arbitrary’. Saussure takes the strong view that ‘The whole process of evolution in a language can be represented as a fluctuation in the overall balance between what is entirely unmotivated and what is relatively motivated’.

Meillet picked up on this idea in an article of the following year, 1912. ‘The Evolution of Grammatical Forms’ is remembered particularly for having introduced the term ‘grammaticalization’. Meillet gives examples comparable to Saussure’s, which not everyone today would recognize as a case of grammaticalization; for example, proto-Germanic biu tagu ‘this day’ grammaticalizing to become Old High German hiutu and Modern German heute ‘today’. English today is itself an example of this type.

From the perspective both of the analysis of the linguistic signs, and of speakers of German, a more semantically transparent biu tagu has given way to a heute that cannot be analyzed into component parts. There is no absolute logical reason why the one is more ‘rational’ than the other, but since Condillac the analyzable character of language has been used to explain the development of rational thought — why it has happened in all human groups, and in no nonhuman ones.
Note again how Saussure said that French ennemi has gone back to being absolutely arbitrary. How does such a ‘reversion’ happen?

Meillet offers an answer. His first example of ‘the passage of autonomous words to the role of grammatical agents,’ that is, grammaticalization, is French suis’am’. It is, he says, autonomous in je suis celui qui suis (I am that I am), and still retains a certain autonomy in je suis chez moi (I am at home). But it ‘has almost ceased to be anything other than a grammatical element in je suis malade (I am sick), je suis maudit (I am accursed), and is only a grammatical element in je suis parti (I’ve departed), je suis allé (I’ve gone), je me suis promené (I’ve taken a walk).’

His choice of words – ‘still retains’, ‘ceased to be’ – clearly implies that originally ‘autonomous’ elements have over time lost their autonomy and become ‘merely’ grammatical. Grammaticalization thus meant loss of self-governance, becoming dependent on another element. This involved an intermediate stage in which words become clichés, ‘habitual’ collocations, on their way to grammaticalization. A word is bleached of its semantic content, becoming functional rather than ‘meaningful’: more mechanical than rational. Meillet, in exposing irrationality not in the use of language, but within the language system itself, diagnoses a condition that perhaps cannot be eliminated, but can be controlled, through the power of a modern linguistic science that, by facing up to it, does not remain under its power. Exposing this adds to the enchantment of language, with the irrationality it encompasses, and of linguistics, with its power to expose and control the irrational, just as a conjuror appears to do.

A third phase in Meillet’s thought begins around 1920 in a shift likely prompted by his reading of Saussure’s Cours. Saussure notes that English gives a more prominent place to the unmotivated than German does, since German indicates grammatical relations through the inflections on nouns and verbs, whereas English does it through position and the use of auxiliaries and prepositions. In this sense, German is more ‘grammatical’ and inclined toward the motivated, while English is more ‘lexical’ and inclined toward the radically arbitrary. This becomes a leading idea in Meillet’s later thought. In a coda (dated May 5, 1920) which he added to his 1909 paper ‘On the Disappearance of the Simple Preterite Forms’ for its republication in 1921, he contrasts Latin with modern English and French:

The essential feature of the morphological structure of Indo-European, and still of Latin, is that the word does not exist independently of the grammatical form: there is no word meaning ‘horse’, there is a nominative singular equus, a genitive singular equi, an accusative plural equos, etc. and no element signifying ‘horse’ can be isolated independently of the endings. On the contrary, in the modern type represented by English and, a bit less
well by French, the word tends to exist independently of any ‘morpheme’: whatever role it plays in the sentence, in English one says *dog* and in French *chien*, where Latin had a series of forms depending on the cases.22

Soon he will depart radically from Durkheim and discuss the psychological development of the Indo-European peoples from an early ‘concrete’ to a more advanced ‘abstract’ stage. In a paper to the Société de Psychologie in 1922, Meillet stated that

French has an invariable word *loup* ‘wolf’, the form of which is always the same, whatever the sentence it appears in, however one envisages the animal [...]. In Latin, on the contrary, there is not really any word that signifies *wolf*; if you want to say that *the wolf has come* you would use the form *lupus*; if you see wolves: *lupos* [...], etc. No one of these forms can be considered as being the name of the *wolf* any more than the others.23

He goes on to say that ‘a Roman was not capable of naming “the wolf in itself”’, and on the basis of this evidence he makes the very broad extrapolation that ‘The universal tendency of language, in the course of civilization, has been to give the noun a character more and more independent of all its particular uses’.24 In the discussion following the paper, Meillet insists further that the development of languages must go from the concrete toward the abstract, and that, consequently, ‘The mentality of an Indo-European differs completely from a modern’.25

In other words, an Indo-European – indeed, a Roman, much closer to us historically – was not *rational* in the way that we moderns are. If Romans could not *name* the wolf in itself, could they *think* it? From a Saussurean point of view, nothing compels us to answer no; thought is not limited to linguistic signifieds. The notion that the structure of one’s language actually limits what one can think is one which modern linguists generally reject as bordering on racism; yet, surprisingly, that appears to be Meillet’s answer in this late phase, when he ties the presence or absence of a case-neutral form directly to ‘mentality’.

Meillet’s 1922 paper to the psychologists would have been very different in 1904. Then he would have upbraided them for not following objective sociological method. Of course, psychoanalysis had a broad cultural effect starting in the 1920s, that ultimately made it futile to try to keep scientific research pure of unobservables such as the ‘mind’. The first French textbook in psychoanalysis, by Raymond de Saussure (1894-1971), son of Ferdinand, with an introduction by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) also dates to 1922.26 Established scientists were, for the most part, immune to the enchantment of Freud, which was massive. It took another generation to grow up immersed in it as part of everyday discourse and
popular culture, to bring it into the mainstream, though its place within academic psychology has been tenuous.

Linguistics was a ‘dry’ subject in need of some enchantment in order to garner public interest and institutional support. That makes it less surprising when we find Meillet in 1922 constructing a grand narrative about mental evolution, or Edward Sapir (1884-1939) beginning to write about the influence of language upon thought the following year. The ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’ suggests that we are none of us so rational as we think, that our rationality is a cultural product, transmitted surreptitiously through our language. Sapir projected synchronically, into the ‘primitive’, the same nexus of irrationality, enchantment and exoticism as did his fellow anthropologists Margaret Mead (1901-1978) and Ruth Benedict (1887-1948). Meillet projected it diachronically, into the past.

**Conclusion**

Modern linguistics has never been modern. There was a gradual shrinkage in the space allotted to rationality in linguistics, from the eighteenth century, when the field itself has not been defined, to the mid-nineteenth, when it has already become generally associated with language as a ‘natural’ phenomenon. In reaction Whitney tries to restore the Subject/Society dimension, though never in a way that is contradictory with the Neogrammarians approach, to which he was sympathetic. Even so, he went a step too far for Saussure, who redressed the balance differently, reinstating eighteenth-century sign theory at the heart of a linguistic system that nevertheless escapes the control of any individual Subject. The idea of language as a ‘social fact’ became a mantra for Meillet and Saussure. By 1912 Meillet was moving away from social analysis toward ‘grammaticalization’, a ‘natural’ process of words and other linguistic elements losing their ‘rational’ content to become functional. The following decade sees him move still further toward psychological accounts that effectively reinvent the idea of the genius of a language, to show how people’s way of thinking evolves over time.

To return finally to Latour, his path forward from modernism would reject the Nature-Society polarization, while retaining the networks of actors, human and nonhuman, which always covertly underlay that polarization. Indeed, he credits the modern Constitution with enabling an unprecedented lengthening of networks and a belief in experimentation, which are among the modern legacies he would retain. He would, however, discard the modern Great Divide between humans and nonhumans, and bring the clandestine practices of mediation into the open. He would keep the postmoderns’ reflexivity, constructivism and denaturalization, but not their ironic reflexivity, critical deconstruction or anachronism.
Above all he would reject the postmodern belief that modernism had actually ever existed in the form which it claimed for itself.

As for antimoderns such as Max Weber, Latour sees ‘nothing worth saving’ in them.\(^{28}\) They too ‘consistently believed what the moderns said about themselves’, and were for the moderns ‘always, in effect, the best of stooges’.\(^{29}\) This is not entirely fair. The enchantment whose loss modernism seemed to entail, and that Weber lamented, was the spiritual dimension that seemed to give more meaning to premodern than to modern existence. While Latour rejects the premodern obligation always to link the social and natural orders, he agrees with those who attribute the crisis of meaning in modern life to their purified separation in the so-called free-floating sign. Perhaps. But what would that point toward as the essential task of a nonmodern linguistics? Would it aim at realizing Socrates’ dream, recounted in the Cratylus, of seeing how signs link to things? This would represent the perfecting of human thought by Entzauberung, the ultimate unmagicking, replacing our individual interpretations of signs with their ‘true’ meanings. Actually, that has been the aim of much of linguistics throughout the modern period: it has always been nonmodern and premodern at the same time. For some of us, though, eliminating the element of interpretation, which gives rise to ambiguity and misunderstanding, would not bring the perfection of humankind, but its undoing, replacing us with what are in effect intelligent machines. Misunderstanding and ambiguity are what make us human, and the vision of a world without them may have been Socrates’ dream; but then, if Meillet was right, given the similar structure of the Greek and Latin noun systems, Socrates would have been no more able than a Roman to name the wolf in itself, to envisage the creature whose essence is to devour everyone around it.

Notes


2. Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 123. Original version, Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: Essai d’anthropologie symétrique (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), 168: ‘Les antimodernes croient dur comme fer que l’Occident a rationalisé et désenchanté le monde, qu’il a vraiment peuplé le social de monstres froids et rationnels qui satureraient tout l’espace, qu’il a transformé pour de bon le cosmos prémoderne en une interaction mécanique de pures matières. Mais, au lieu d’y voir, comme les modernisateurs, de glorieuses bien que douloureuses conquêtes, les antimodernes y voient une catastrophe sans égale. [...] Les postmodernes, toujours pervers, acceptent l’idée qu’il s’agit bien d’une catastrophe mais affirment qu’il faut s’en réjouir au lieu de s’en lamenter!’.
Enchantment in the Development of Linguistics

3 Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 13. Original (Nous n’avons jamais été modernes, 23): ‘On définit souvent la modernité par l’humanisme, soit pour saluer la naissance de l’homme, soit pour annoncer sa mort. Mais cette habitude même est moderne parce qu’elle reste asymétrique. Elle oublie la naissance conjointe de la ’non-humanité’, celle des choses, ou des objets, ou des bêtes, et celle, non moins étrange, d’un Dieu barré, hors jeu. La modernité vient de la création conjointe des trois, puis du recouvrement de cette naissance conjointe et du traitement séparé des trois communautés pendant que, en dessous, les hybrides continuent de se multiplier par l’effet même de ce traitement séparé. C’est cette double séparation qu’il nous faut reconstruire entre le haut et le bas d’une part, entre les humains et les non-humains d’autre part’.

4 Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, 37; Nous n’avons jamais été modernes, 57: ‘Si vous les critiquez en disant que la nature est un monde construit de mains d’homme, ils vous montreront qu’elle est transcendantale et qu’ils n’y touchent pas. Si vous leur dites que la société est transcendantale et que ses lois nous dépasse infiniment, ils vous diront que nous sommes libres et que notre destin est entre nos seules mains’. Porter’s translation reverses the clauses in the second sentence.

5 Their poles are always somewhat hybrid, as attempts to ‘purify’ a natural or conventional account of language have failed ever since Plato’s Cratylus. There, Socrates easily shows Hermogenes that individuals are bound to the social force of their language just as much as if it were a creation of nature, and shows Cratylus that, however ideal it would be for languages to signify naturally, we cannot determine whether they do. See John E. Joseph, Limiting the Arbietary: Linguistic Naturalism and Its Opposites in Plato’s Cratylus and Modern Theories of Language (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2000), and ‘The Natural: Its Meanings and Functions in the History of Linguistic Thought’, in Douglas A. Kibbee (ed.), History of Linguistics 2005: Papers from the Tenth International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences (ICHoLS X), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2-5 Sept. 2005 (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007), 1-23.

6 Dominique Bouhours, SJ, Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène (Paris: chez Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1671). The concept, like all concepts, has earlier historical roots, but Bouhours’s version of it stands at the head of the powerful developments that would take place over the next two centuries.


11 See John E. Joseph, Saussure (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), where all of the points about Saussurean thought discussed in the present paper are treated much more fully.

servi de cible, pendant cinquante ans, à une certaine critique, étaient plus près de la vérité quand ils disaient, selon leur manière simple et honnête, que les mots sont des signes. Où ils avaient tort, c’est quand ils rapportaient tout à la raison raisonnante.


16 Saussure and Constantin, ‘Notes préparatoires/Linguistique générale’, 233.


18 Ibid., 387 (repr. in Meillet, Linguistique historique, 133). Original: ‘le passage de mots autonomes au rôle d’agents grammaticaux’ (this and the following excerpts from Meillet are in my translation).

19 Ibid., 385 (repr. in Meillet, Linguistique historique, 131). Original: ‘il n’est presque plus qu’un élément grammatical dans: je suis malade, je suis maudit, et il n’est tout à fait qu’un élément grammatical dans: je suis parti, je suis allé, je me suis promené […]’.


21 Saussure, Cours, 2nd ed. (1922), 183.

22 Antoine Meillet, ‘Sur la disparition des formes simples du prétérit’, Germanische-Romanische Monatsschrift 1 (1909), 521-526 (repr., including the coda, in Meillet, Linguistique historique et linguistique générale, vol. 1, 149-158, 156-157). Original: ‘Le trait essentiel de la structure morphologique de l’indo-européen, et encore du latin, c’est que le mot n’existe pas indépendamment de la forme grammaticale: il n’y a pas un mot signifiant ‘cheval’, il y a un nominatif singulier *equus*, un génitif singulier *equi*, un accusatif pluriel *equos*, etc. et l’on ne saurait isoler aucun élément signifiant cheval indépendamment des finales. Au contraire, dans le type moderne représenté par l’anglais, et, un peu moins bien par le français, le mot tend à exister indépendamment de tout ‘morphème’: quel que soit le rôle joué dans la phrase, on dit en anglais *dog* et en français *chien*, là où le latin avait une série de formes suivant les cas.’

23 Antoine Meillet, ‘Le caractère concret du mot’, Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique 20 (1923), 246ff.; repr. in Meillet, Linguistique historique et linguistique générale (Paris: Champion, 1936), vol. 2, 9-13, 11. Original: ‘Le français a un mot ‘loup’ invariable, dont la forme est toujours la même, quelle que soit la phrase où ce mot figure, quelle que soit la façon dont on envisage l’animal […]’. En latin au contraire, il n’y a à vrai dire aucun mot qui signifie ‘loup’; si l’on veut dire ‘le loup est venu’, on aura la forme: *lupus*; si l’on voit des loups: *lupos* […] etc. On ne peut pas considérer l’une quelconque de ces formes comme étant le nom du ‘loup’ plutôt que les autres.’

24 Meillet, Linguistique historique, vol. 2, 13: ‘un Romain n’était pas capable de nommer le loup en soi. […] La tendance universelle du langage, au cours de la civilisation, a été de donner au nom un caractère de plus en plus indépendant de tous ses emplois particuliers.’
28 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 134.