

---

## NEW EVIDENCE ON THE ORIGINS OF EUROPEAN STRUCTURALISM

### MRS SAUSSURE'S DIARY 21 June 1912

In 1996 papers were found in the Saussure family home in Geneva which throw light on the development of some of the most important ideas in twentieth century intellectual history (Harris 2003: 214-52). Most of these papers have been published (Bouquet & Engler 2002), but one so far unpublished fragment is the following diary entry.

---

Ferdinand has been looking a little peaky recently. I'm sure he's working far too hard. The university administrators are introducing new degree structures, and he has to benchmark his teaching, so as to define and delimit his aims and content. He'd clearly much rather go on teaching all those old languages he is so fond of. The *exercice de l'évaluation de recherches* has also been getting him down. He hasn't published anything since that little booklet on Indo-European vowels 30 years ago – he's such a perfectionist – and his colleagues are starting to ask questions.

Over his *petit déjeuner* yesterday, he got very philosophical about his *croissants*: when you buy them, they have a recognisable structure, he said, but when you dip them in your *café au lait* they are no longer a well-defined object, because they go all soggy and leave bits floating on the surface.

Yesterday evening his colleagues, Albert and Charles, joined us at Chez Maxim, where we had a lovely three course dinner. For the introductory course we all had patois de foie gras with fresh paroles and butter. Then I hesitated between some rather nice fishman dishes, plaice of articulation or elaborated cod with basil, but then decided on chicken fricative with pasta tense. F had velar escalope, A had lamb curry with basmati grice, and C had chicken in a basquet with a side dish of cornish on the cob. For dessert I had IC-cream with cranberry sauss and the others had henry sweets.

Then F kept saying: "But what can we have for the fourth course?" I thought to myself, well, at least he's not lost his appetite. But he said, "*Non, non, non*", he meant the *quatrième cours à l'université*.

Albert then started teasing Charles by claiming that fish and chips was one of his favourite dishes. C said it was a disgusting British dish that he wouldn't feed to the cat. But F said that it didn't matter what it tasted like, or even what kind of fish it

was, you couldn't have it as well as steak and chips, and in addition you couldn't have it for dessert. "*Justement!*", said C, "Fancy wanting ice-cream with fish and chips, *ils sont fous, les anglais!* There is nothing to compare with French *cuisine*." "*Non, non, non,*" said F, "I mean it is just a different *systeme*, you can't contrast *craie* with *fromage*." To which C grumbled, "English cheese tastes like chalk."

The three *messieurs* then starting furiously drawing diagrams on their serviettes. They had a kind of tree with boxes at the end of the branches labelled "first", "second" and "third course", and contents labelled "starters", "main course" and "pudding", with lots of alternatives in each slot, some with double branches (such as *searloin steak plus pommes fries*). And menus with little stars, which they said signalled cultural impossibilities, such as *\*steak and chips* with *spaghetti and pesto*, or *\*main course* followed by *soup*. Though A pointed out that soup at the end of the meal was "a syntagmatic possibility" in China (it's amazing what these *professeurs* know). This little *aperçu* pleased F enormously. "The sequence is arbitrary", he kept saying (though, *entre nous*, I don't think he'd like it if the *au pair* brought the soup after the cheese and fruit).

I think F realised that he had been a bit sharp with his colleagues, because he then said "But of course, as you so rightly point out, *mes chers collègues*, fish and chips is a sign of Britishness, just as *steak pommes frites* is a sign of Frenchness." "Or *Rösti* is a sign of Swissness", I added. My example seemed to take F's fancy.

"A completely general theory of x-ness", he said several times.

"Sometimes you sound like a structuralist", said A.

"What's a structuralist?" said F, and lapsed into a long silence.

Then they started arguing about the pepper-pot and whether the content – all the grains of pepper – had any structure of their own or whether they were only given shape by the pot. F argued that there is no such thing as a heap of pepper. One grain is not a heap, if you add another grain, that doesn't turn a non-heap into a heap, so there is no such thing as a heap. (I think he was joking, but you can never tell with these academic types.)

"You might as well argue that Latin was an early form of French", said A.

"Or that the horse and cart was an early form of motor-car", said C.

"Quite!", said F. "Each historical state has to be studied separately".

By this time F was waving the pepper-pot about and the lid flew off, making a large heap of pepper on the table.

We all started sneezing, so we went out to have our *café* in the *jardin*. F became very pensive as he wandered around under the trees muttering:

"Arbre, tree, arbitraire, arbre, tree, arbitrary, arbre, tree, arbitraire ...".

I thought – though I kept the thought to myself – that it's not at all arbitrary, and if I asked the gardener to plant a *Chestnut-Baum* to provide some *Schatten* for the *Poisson-Pond*, he'd probably think that *madame* had lost her marbles.

It was a funny day, but the rather odd conversations seemed to give F food for thought (ha ha!). I just hope he doesn't have to spend all his time lecturing. He doesn't seem to have many students anyway. If he has more time for his own writing, I'm sure that he will one day receive the fame and recognition that he deserves. He's promised to pop round and have a word with his publisher tomorrow, but I'll believe that when I see it.

---

Editor's notes.

S. Bouquet & R. Engler eds (2002) *Écrits de linguistique générale par Ferdinand de Saussure*. Paris: Gallimard.

R. Harris (2003) *Saussure and his Interpreters*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh UP.

---

© Copyright Michael Stubbs 2013 ©

---