

Joseph, John E. *Saussure*. Oxford University Press, 2012 (pp 780). ISBN 0-19-969565-2.

The *Course in General Linguistics* stands as the most influential academic text of the twentieth century – and perhaps of all time – that wasn't written by its putative author. As such, a biography which could intertwine historical and biographical material with the hundreds of manuscript pages in Saussure's own hand would be of enormous interpretative value. We have had to wait too long for such a work, but at last we have it.

John Joseph's monumental work is written in five parts. The first takes place entirely before Saussure's birth; one wonders for a moment if the story will take a Shandyesque turn and never quite get there. But the time is well spent in establishing the social, political and philosophical world into which Saussurean linguistics was born. Part Two takes us from Saussure's birth in 1857 into an aristocratic and academic Genevese family, through the publication of the *Mémoire* on Indo-European vowels, to the granting of his doctorate at the age of twenty-one. Joseph's detailed analysis of the *Mémoire*, and the scores of abandoned manuscripts from this time, show how much of Saussure's mature thought – his theorisation of language as purely mental and differential, the priority given to synchronic analysis – was already fully formed some twenty years prior to the *Course*. Part Three covers Saussure's years in Paris, teaching at the École des Hautes Études and his involvement in the Société de Linguistique de Paris. Saussure's decreasing written output in this period is matched by an increasing regard – worship, even – from his Parisian colleagues and students, among them Louis Havet and Michel Bréal.

The final two parts take Saussure back to the Université de Genève to teach Sanskrit, Greek and Latin phonology, and much later, through a chance vacancy, general linguistics. Much of the source material for the lectures presented here, including the “double essence” manuscripts, the notebooks on phonetics, and the Orangery manuscripts, has been published previously. But thanks to Joseph's indefatigable search for letters, diaries and official records, he is able to amplify the value of these manuscripts by situating them very precisely within the milieu of their creation. As a result, we now have a clearer picture of the distillation and progression of Saussure's thinking than ever before.

If Saussure's first attempt at teaching general linguistics betrays a certain indecision about where to begin, his second is marked by a spectacular burst of brilliance, on 12 November 1908. The second course begins right in the middle of things, with the arbitrary nature of the sign, the double essence of language, the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, and the social fact of language as a system of signs. Joseph is well justified in writing that “If a few loose ends were left untied in this lecture, the audience was too dazzled to notice. They had just

heard Ferdinand de Saussure present the gist of what would be twentieth century linguistics” (537).

So what caused Saussure’s career, after such a precocious beginning, to end in complete silence? The reasons mount up from the 1880s in his heavy teaching load, his work for the Société, his duties to his young family, and the responsibilities of being the eldest child of an aristocratic dynasty. Most of all, though, the silence was caused by a creeping paralysis of perfectionism. As Joseph puts it, “He managed to persuade the world to think about language in a different way – yet never managed to persuade himself” (651). But what gradually becomes clear is that whilst Saussure may have sacrificed his writing for the sake of his students, it was only through teaching that he was finally able to articulate his approach to general linguistics. In between the first and second courses, Charles Bally was already ready to claim that “Your students’ notebooks would form a true scientific library; they would suffice to renew our ideas and our methods on a great number of points, if only you did not jealously preserve the treasures of your mind for a small circle of initiates” (527). Indeed, Saussure’s final course in general linguistics has the quality of a dictated textbook, in which he indicates revisions to early lectures, and suggests “chapters” which could be inserted into the text.

Saussure is a work of staggering scholarship and exceptional wisdom in its selections. As with all of Joseph’s work it is written with clarity, verve and humour. There is also something grandly humanising about this biography of a man who, like Vincent van Gogh, would achieve widespread recognition only after his death. In the end, Joseph achieves what many of us, not least his students at the Université de Genève, would like to do: to express our thanks.

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