

The Opposition and Unity of Saussure's and Lacan's Views on Linguistic Signs

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Abstract—Saussure's view on linguistic signs emphasizes the one-to-one correspondence of the signifier and the signified and their arbitrary combination. According to this view, the meaning of linguistic signs comes from the difference between the signs. Lacan revises Saussure's view on linguistic signs by introducing linguistic activities into unconsciousness. Lacan emphasizes the dominant status of the signifier and holds that the signified slides under the signified incessantly, which leads to the indeterminacy of meaning. Saussure's and Lacan's views on linguistic signs are obviously opposite to each other, but Saussure's dichotomy of speech activity between langue and parole provides the basis for their unity. Saussure gives attention to langue which is the product of the collective speech activity while Lacan concerns about parole which is the product of the individual speech activity. Therefore, the two views are both opposite and unified.

Keywords—Lacan; Saussure; signifier; signified; opposition; unity

I. INTRODUCTION

Swedish linguist Ferdinand de Saussure was the founder of the structural linguistics in the early 20th century. His linguistic viewpoints are mainly concerned with the distinction between langue and parole, the signifier and the signified, the syntagmatic and the associative relationships, synchronic and diachronic linguistics, etc. Among these, the relationship between the signifier and the signified was criticized and revised by Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst, who introduced linguistic activities into unconsciousness, which improved Sigmund Freud's theory of unconsciousness. Whether Lacan's and Saussure's views are totally incompatible or partially identical, or whether they can be unified in some sense remain to be discussed. This paper is going to make a discussion of these two views and find out the answers to the above questions.

II. SAUSSURE'S VIEW ON LINGUISTIC SIGNS

A. Dichotomy Between the Signifier and the Signified

Saussure denies that language is a nomenclature that labels different things differently. According to Saussure,

linguistic signs do not associate things and names, but concepts and sound images. Therefore, a linguistic sign is a two-sided psychological entity, a combination of a concept and a sound image, as shown in "Fig. 1".

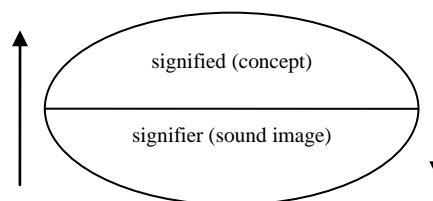


Fig. 1. Saussure's model of a linguistic sign.

Saussure's Model of a linguistic sign has the following characteristics:

First, the linguistic sign consists of the signifier and the signified. In the model, the signifier "concept" is at the upper part and the signified "sound image" is at the lower part, which highlights the important status of the former. Sound images only provide an arbitrary segmentation of thought. The letters in both the "signifier" and "signified" are in lowercase, which indicates that although they are different to some extent, they still share something common.

Second, the line between the signifier and the signified indicates the duality and composability of a linguistic sign. It means that there is no inherent and natural relationship between the signifier and the signified, but they can be combined based on some principles.

Third, the circle around the signifier and the signified indicates that they are considered as a whole and there is an inseparable and stable one-to-one correspondence between them once they are combined. Just as Saussure (2001: 111) put it, "A language might also be compared to a sheet of paper. Thought is one side of the sheet and sound the reverse side. Just as it is impossible to take a pair of scissors and cut one side of paper without at the same time cutting the other, so it is impossible in a language to isolate sound from thought, or thought from sound".

Finally, there are two arrows on both sides of the linguistic sign. The direction of the arrows is opposite, indicating the harmonious and associative relationship between the signifier and the signified.

B. Natures of a Linguistic Sign

Saussure (2001: 67-69) holds that linguistic signs have two important natures: arbitrariness and linearity. The arbitrariness means that the combination of a signifier and a signified is arbitrary. The sound image helps us to decompose our chaotic thoughts into different concepts. But which sound and which part of thought will be combined is arbitrary and unmotivated, which forms the principle of arbitrariness of linguistic signs. However, "it must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker. The individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community" (Saussure, 2001: 68). Therefore, arbitrariness does not mean that the speaker can arbitrarily choose and combine a signifier with a signified, but that the combination is unmotivated.

Another nature of linguistic signs is linearity, which means when linguistic signs are used, they are strung in a linear way. That is to say, the speaker can utter only one word each time, so the words are uttered one by one linearly to form a sentence. As Saussure (2001: 69-70) put it, "The linear character of the sign means that the linguistic signal has a temporal aspect and hence certain temporal characteristics: (a) it occupies a certain temporal space, and (b) this space is measured in just one dimension: it is a line".

Moreover, a linguistic sign is both invariable and variable. The signifier seems to be freely chosen for a signified, but the combination is compulsory for a linguistic community. The initial assignment of names to things establishes a contract between concepts and sound patterns (Saussure, 2001: 69-72). The facts that languages are the heritage of history and a nation is generally satisfied with the language they use are the basis for the invariability of the language. Although the combination of a signifier and a signified is arbitrary and the change of linguistic signs is unmotivated, the change from an established combination to a new one is generally rejected by language users of a linguistic community. The complexity of the symbolic system composed of a large number of linguistic signs makes it difficult to change any one of them because this will greatly influence the integrity of the system as well as the harmonious relationship between the signs. At the same time, the mixture and communication of language users of all ages ensure the coherence of language inheritance, which brings about a collective inertia to resist language innovation and the change of linguistic signs. However, linguistic signs are not always invariable. Since languages cannot be separated from their users, the users' new choice of the signifier-signified combination to meet their needs in specific context will gradually remove the continuity and stability of linguistic signs, resulting in language changes. However, only when this social effect is combined with time can it lead to the change of linguistic signs. Thus languages are an

adaptive system which is constantly changed by their users with the passage of time.

C. Language as a Value System

According to Saussure, language is a value system in which the meaning of a word arises from the differences between the values of linguistic signs, or specifically, the relationship between linguistic values. Saussure examined the value of linguistic signs in terms of conceptual aspect, material aspect and the sign as a whole. In a given language, all the words which express neighboring ideas help define one another's meaning (Saussure, 2001: 114). Saussure used the English and French words which express the meanings of "sheep" and "mutton" as the examples to show that the value of the English word "sheep" is different from that of the French word "mouton" because in addition to the word "sheep", there is another word "mutton" in English, but the French word "mouton" have the values of both the English words. Therefore, the concept expressed by a linguistic sign is determined by its position in the language system, that is, by the relationship with other elements, which is its "value" in the system. The same is true of the material aspect of linguistic signs. The sound of a word is not in itself important, but the phonetic contrasts which allow us to distinguish that word from any other (Saussure, 2001: 116). Therefore, the language system is a value system which combines sounds and concepts. If the signifier and the signified are considered separately, there are only negative differences in language, while the combination of the two produces positive differences in language signs.

To sum up, Saussure put forward the signifier/signified model of linguistic signs based on the view of binary opposition. Although the relationship between a signifier and a signified is unmotivated, but once the relationship is established, it will be a stable one-to-one correspondence and become a social contract, which is called the invariability of language signs. However, as time goes on, linguistic signs are also variable to some extent. The signifiers in a language are linearly connected, and the meaning of a linguistic sign is determined by its relationship with other relevant linguistic signs.

III. LACAN'S CRITICISM ON AND REVISION OF SAUSSURE'S MODEL

A. Lacan's Model of Linguistic Signs

Lacan criticized and revised Saussure's view on linguistic signs, especially the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Lacan believes that there exists a realm of "pure signifier", where the signifier exists before the presence of the signified, and the realm of the pure logical structure is unconsciousness (Dylan Evans, 2001:183). Lacan developed his own theory of linguistic signs based on Saussure's model, but he separated the positive combination of the signifier and the signified and put forward that unconsciousness runs through linguistic activities. For Lacan, a language is not composed of signs, but of signifiers. Lacan inverted the position of the signifier and the signified in Saussure's model. In Lacan's model, the

signifier is at the upper part while the signified is at the lower part, as shown in “Fig. 2”.

$\underline{S} \rightarrow$ Signifiant (**Signifier**)
 $s \rightarrow$ signifié (signified)

Fig. 2. Lacan’s model of a linguistic sign.

According to Lacan (1977: 149), the bar between the signifier and the signified indicates that they are separated by a barrier that resists signification. Compared with Saussure’s model of linguistic signs, Lacan’s has the following characteristics.

First, the roles of the signifier and the signified are reversed. The sound image (the signifier) is at the upper part while the concept (the signified) is at the lower part, which highlights the importance of the signifier.

Second, the first letter of the word “signifier” is in upper case while that of the “signified” is in lower case, which emphasizes the decisive role of the signifier in a linguistic sign.

Third, the bar separates the combination of the signifier and the signified, which indicates that they belong to two relatively independent systems, that is, the subject and the object systems. On the one hand, there is an insurmountable barrier between the signifier and the signified, but on the other hand it is possible for them to be combined temporarily.

Fourth, there is no circle around or arrow beside the signifier and the signified, which suggests that they are opposite and not unified, and they can be combined but cannot form a stable one-to-one correspondence.

Lacan used two examples to show this unstable relationship between the signifier and the signified. The first is that the different signifiers can be related to the same signified. For example, “ladies” and “gentlemen” can be used to refer to the same door. The second is that a little boy and a little girl used different signifiers to refer to the same railway station. That is to say, the same signified can correspond to different signifiers and the signifier is directed to a specific signified only as a result of the speaker’s choice. We are forced, then to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004: 451). In Lacan’s model, there is an indeterminate and temporal relationship between the signifier and the signified.

B. Network of Signifiers

Lacan believes that there is no linear connection between signifiers. Instead, they form a network. Saussure holds that signifiers are connected to each other according to a limited number of rules in a linear way and it is the linearity that helps to form a signifier chain which fits perfectly with the sequence of the words in speech and writing.

But Lacan thought differently: “It is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning “insists” but that none of its elements “consists” in the signification of which it is at the moment capable. The linearity applies to the chain of discourse only in the direction in which it is orientated in time. But polyphony can be heard if one listens to poetry, for

all discourse is aligned along the several staves of a score. There is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended ‘vertically’, as it were, from that point” (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004: 451). That is to say, the signifiers form a network instead of a simple linear chain.

C. Variability of Linguistic Signs

Lacan rejected Saussure’s view of the invariability and variability of linguistic signs. According to Lacan’s, the signified slides under the signifier, thus their combination is always variable but not invariable. This variability depends on the interaction between the signifier-user and the context. It is the language user who decides which signified a signifier is going to be combined with. The combination can be changed in different contexts and decided by the language user himself.

Another difference between Lacan’s and Saussure’s views on linguistic signs is that they explain the generation of meanings in different ways. Unlike Saussure’s theory which treats meanings as the values determined by the difference between the linguistic signs, Lacan holds that meanings are generated based on the fact that the meaning of a word can vary with the speaker’s choice of the signified, which forms a chain of the signified sliding under the signifier. The expression of meanings often becomes a game of saying-yes-and-meaning-no, while understanding is a game of tracing-and-capturing-the-meaning (Lacan, 2001: Preface11).

In summary, Lacan’s view on linguistic signs rejects Saussure’s views that the signifier and the signified have a stable one-to-one correspondence, that the signifiers are connected linearly, that the combination of the signifier and the signified is both variable and invariable, and that meanings arise from the value difference of linguistic signs. Lacan holds that there is always variability in the combination of the signifier and the signified, and the combination depends on the language user’s choice.

IV. THE UNITY OF LACAN’S AND SAUSSURE’S VIEWS ON LINGUISTIC SIGNS

The difference between Lacan’s and Saussure’s views on linguistic signs reflects their opposition, but they are unified if viewed from the perspective of speech activity itself.

Saussure divides the speech activity into two categories: langue (language) and parole (speech). Langue is a social product stored in the collective mind and independent of the individual will. The mode of existence of a language may be represented by the following formula: $1+1+1+1\dots=1$ (collective model) (Saussure, 2001: 19). Parole is an individual product which is temporal and dependent on the will of a speaker. It is no more than an aggregate of particular cases, which may be represented by the following formula: $(1+1'+1''+1'''+\dots)$ (Saussure, 2001: 19). Saussure believes that the study of langue is the core of linguistic studies. He emphasizes the law of universality while neglects that of individuality. He attaches importance

to the study of the language system itself rather than the use of a language by speakers.

Therefore, the linguistic signs discussed by Saussure are at the level of *langue* rather than *parole*. The rules for the combination of the signifier and the signified are determined by collective speech activities. For the communication in a community to be carried out smoothly, the relationship between the signifier and the signified has to be stable and invariable to the utmost extent. Otherwise, the communication would be impossible.

Lacan rejected the positive combination of the signifier and the signified and proposed that language activities involve unconsciousness. Lacan focused on the use of linguistic signs, thus what he discussed is individual speech activity which is referred to as *parole* by Saussure.

Lacan's model of linguistic signs exaggerates the function of the signifier and emphasizes the role of language users in forming the relationship between the signifier and the signified. It is undeniable that two different signifiers can be used to refer to the same door or the same railway station, but it is the specific and temporary language use involved in individual speaker's signifying activity, rather than the stable correspondence approved by the collective mind of a language community. In reality, neither "ladies" nor "gentlemen" can be used to refer to a door, only the signifier "/dɔr/(door)" has a stable correspondence to the concept of "door", thus can be used to refer to the real door, and only the proper name of that station corresponds to the specific station. It is the specific context that allows and drives speakers to abandon the solid relationship between the signifier and the signified.

Therefore, the discussions made by Lacan and Saussure on linguistic signs are not at the same level. Saussure values the study of *langue* and lays emphasis on the language stored in the collective mind. In this sense, the signifiers of "/lediz/(ladies)" and "/dʒɛntlmən/(gentlemen)" are related to the concepts of different groups of people divided by their genders. They do not have any stable relationship with the doors or even the restrooms. What Lacan referred to as the sliding of the signifier under the signified is actually the result of an individual speaker's use of a linguistic sign in a specific context. The speaker can use a signifier to refer to anything he wants to as long as the participants in the communication can understand what he is referring to. This also conforms to Wittgenstein's use theory, which holds that the meaning of a word or a sentence is in its use. But if all speakers break the stable relationship between the signifier and the signified in all linguistic communications, how can the meaning be determined? In reality, the use of linguistic signs in communication at most times conforms to the rule that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified. The sliding of the signified under the signifier is only possible at some time and specific to some cases. The temporary changes and indeterminacies of the combination in the use of a language are only due to the interaction between the speaker and the context at that time.

However, no matter how the context and users change, there is always a relatively stable relationship between the

signifier and the signified in a linguistic sign. Only in this way can we have a unified and socially recognized language system and come to a mutual understanding based on the collective consciousness, otherwise verbal communication will be impossible.

Lacan's view on linguistic signs corresponds to our unconscious speech activities, while Saussure emphasizes the linguistic rules in the collective mind. Lacan introduced linguistic activities into unconsciousness and corrected Freud's view that unconsciousness is a biological mechanism full of desire, impulse, pressure and tendency. In Lacan's view, the language in dreams provides the only way to the unconsciousness. When we deal with the unconsciousness, what we encounter is nothing but the language. Therefore, we can use linguistic rules to follow the chain of signifiers to reveal the hidden unconsciousness.

In summary, Saussure analyzed the linguistic signs at the level of language, while Lacan probed into the unconscious linguistic signs at the level of speech, thus they are unified in speech activities.

V. CONCLUSION

Saussure's view on linguistic signs emphasizes the dominant status of "concept", i.e. the signified, and holds that the combination of the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, but there is a one-to-one correspondence between them once they are combined, and there is a linear chain that connects signifiers. The meaning of a linguistic sign comes from the value difference of the signs.

Lacan's view on linguistic signs emphasizes the dominant status of the "sound image", i.e. signifier, which means that the signified is only the object the speaker refers to in a context, resulting in the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. The combination of the signifier and the signified is always variable and the signifiers form a network instead of a linear chain. Thus the meaning of a linguistic sign becomes indeterminate.

The distinctive differences between Saussure's and Lacan's views on linguistic signs seem to indicate that they are completely contradictory and incompatible. However, when Saussure's dichotomy of speech activity is considered, there is a unity between them. Saussure pays attention to *langue* while Lacan concerns about *parole*, that is, the individual speech activities. Therefore, they are both opposite and unified because they are concerned with different categories of the speech activity.

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