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Pre-structuralist semiology: materiality of language in Ferdinand de Saussure

https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2023-0114
Received August 3, 2023; accepted May 4, 2024; published online June 13, 2024

Abstract: Taking the manuscript On the Dual Essence of Language as a starting point, the article follows the scholarly tradition of reexamining the position of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics regarding twentieth-century semiotics and structuralism. After half a century of research on Saussure’s manuscript legacy, the manuscript discovered in 1996 and published for the first time in 2002 develops aspects of Saussure’s linguistic thought that cannot be inferred on the basis of previously known texts. One of these aspects concerns the crucial question of the nature of the linguistic sign and the process of signification, as well as the role of linguistic science in understanding such problems. The current text aims at reconstructing Saussure’s ideas on these points through an analysis of the notion of final quaternion, claiming that this notion presents an alternative concept of the linguistic sign and signification process that hasn’t been explored so far. It involves a five-sided relationship of non-pregiven elements in one signifying complex that is neither signifier, nor signified, and in the end, brings to the fore the material dimension of verbal language.

Keywords: signification; Ferdinand de Saussure; manuscripts; final quaternion

1 Preliminary remarks

The name of Ferdinand de Saussure is traditionally associated with two theoretical paradigms in twentieth-century Western thought: semiotics and structuralism. However, in researching the role of materiality in Saussure’s project for a science of language, the present study will terminologically move away from both. In his writings, Saussure never used the term semiotics, and introduced as a science of semiosis a field he called semiology. In the subsequent tradition, those two terms are often used interchangeably since Saussure’s semiology is mostly identified as a linguistic counterpart of what emerged about the same time as semiotics in the context of American pragmatism (mainly due to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce). A more careful reading of both Saussure and Peirce, however, shows the fundamentally

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different nature of their projects. Semiotics and semiology existed for a while as concurrent or synonymous terms in the Continental context of the 1960s, with semiotics gaining the upper hand after the work of Roman Jakobson and Umberto Eco. In the present study, we choose to use systematically the terms *semiology* and *semiological* as more adequately rendering Saussure’s original conceptual framework about human signifying activity.

The second terminological preliminary point concerns the term *structuralism*. The problem of Saussure’s generally acknowledged involvement in structuralism deserves detailed research, which cannot be undertaken here. We will limit our remarks to already existing research on the topic of the emergence of the method of structuralism in the intellectual circles of the Prague linguistic school at the time of Roman Jakobson’s and Nikolai Trubetzkoy’s presence there.¹

Third, we must take into account the specific status of Saussure’s manuscript legacy. Today we know that the first decades in the reception of Saussure’s thought through the version of his *Course in General Linguistics* edited by his colleagues Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye and published posthumously in 1916, provided a rather distorted rendering of Saussure’s chaotic and eccentric ideas in linguistics and studies of culture, channeling them back to more classical and even truistic interpretations. The critique of Bally and Sechehaye’s work started with Robert Godel’s (1957) research on the manuscript sources of Saussure’s linguistic conception in the 1950s, and was followed by important contributions like Rudolf Engler’s critical edition of the *Course* in the 1960s (Saussure 1989), and monographs by Konrad Körner, d’Arco Silvio Avalle, Johannes Fehr, Ludwig Jäger, and Beata Stawarska, among others.²

Thanks to Engler’s critical edition of the *Course* collating the published version with a huge amount of other manuscript notes, and to the separate editions of Saussure’s three courses of lectures on general linguistics in the 1990s, today we can assess the actual scale of Bally and Sechehaye’s editorial intervention and its effect on the representation of Saussure’s ideas. However, the systematization of Bally and Sechehaye has to a certain extent become traditional and – even at the cost of

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¹ According to Patrick Sériot’s (2014) seminal monograph *Structure and the Whole*, structuralism as a method in linguistics and human sciences emerged as a direct consequence of the ideological and even political positions of the Russian émigrés, and its basic claims generally contradict most of Saussure’s linguistic ideas.

² See Avalle (1995), Fehr (2000 [1995]), Jäger (2010), and Koerner (1973). The most pointed critique against the interventions of the two editors, especially those of Bally, is to be found in Beata Stawarska’s (2015) monograph *Saussure’s Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology:Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics*. However, there are also voices in defense of the efforts of the two editors, justifying their work as the best they could have done, given the circumstances (see for example Gandon 2006: 16).
significant displacements of some of Saussure’s ideas – has the merit of introducing a plausible map of the central questions that structured in one way or another the vast scope of Saussure’s scholarly interests. One of these points is the delineation of the notion of semiology as a separate realm of interest.

2 The notion of semiology and its development in Saussure


In the critical edition of the CLG, edited by Rudolf Engler, semiology is simply defined as une science des signes (‘a science of signs’; E 277, II R 12).³ Saussure speaks about it entirely in the future tense, emphasizing that such a science doesn’t exist yet. The question of the limits and characteristics of semiology arises. Saussure refers to a book in epistemology by Adrien Naville, Nouvelle classification des sciences. Naville (1845–1930) was a philosopher and a friend of Saussure’s, his work was focused mainly on religious philosophy, but also on epistemology, and Nouvelle classification des sciences underwent no less than three editions: 1888, 1901, and 1920. Saussure’s reference to Naville and the passages of Nouvelle classification des sciences that discuss semiology have been researched by Tullio De Mauro (Saussure and De Mauro 2005a: 318–319), and especially by Engler (1974: 45–73, 1980: 3–16, esp. 4–6), and later by Joseph (2012: 460–462) who also highlights the differences between Saussure and Naville (mainly with respect to the position of semiology among other human sciences, especially psychology and sociology) while still tracing the genealogy of twentieth-century semiology back to their discussion (Joseph 2012: 536–538).

In the first edition of Nouvelle classification des sciences from 1888, semiology isn’t mentioned at all; neither is it mentioned in the third one from 1920, published more than fifteen years after Saussure’s death. The term semiology appears only in the second edition from 1901, and the footnote in the CLG mentioning Naville (CLG 34, E 297) refers precisely to this edition. Here we find three additional paragraphs on semiology and its place among other sciences. These passages are historically the first instance where the form semiology appears in print. In fact, Naville doesn’t

claim to have invented the term – he directly recalls Saussure and in introducing semiology, seems to do some sort of marginal note on an idea of a friend of his:

Mr. Ferdinand de Saussure insists on the importance of a very general science which he calls *semiologie* and the object of which would be the laws of the creation and transformation of signs and their meaning. Semiology is an essential part of sociology. Since the most important sign system of all is conventional human language, the most advanced semiotic science would necessarily be *linguistics*, or the science of the laws of language ... Linguistics is, or at least tends to become more and more, a science of laws; it will distinguish itself ever more clearly from language history and grammar. (Naville 1901: 104)

So, despite the reference to an authority in epistemology (his friend Naville), it was Saussure who invented the notion of semiology. Thus, semiology is defined as “une branche des sciences relevant de la psychologie et de la sociologie” (‘a scientific branch pertaining to psychology and sociology’; E 284, II R 16). And further, “[c]ette psychologie des signes sera une partie de la psychologie sociale” (‘[t]his psychology of signs would be a part of social psychology’; E 285, D 7).

In Saussure’s view, the epistemological value of semiology is identified as pertaining to both psychology and sociology (Joseph 2012: 461). Furthermore, Saussure seems to be speaking of semiology as a science broader than linguistics and gives examples with other semiotic systems such as rites and ceremonies, the rules of politeness, different writing systems, the alphabet of the deaf and dumb and that of the blind, military or marine signals (most of these examples are subsumed under the heading of “social institutions”). The development of such a science is thus described as necessitated by the existence of a potential scientific object called *faits*.

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4 All italics in quotations are in the original.
5 All translations are mine.
6 For research on the sociological and psychological value of Saussure’s semiology, see the work of Rossana De Angelis (2012, 2022a, 2022b). It is accepted that Saussure inherited the emphasis on the social nature of language, and hence on the sociological dimension of semiology, from the American linguist William Dwight Whitney. Persuasive genealogical arguments are given by Prosdocimi (1984). A systematic study of this aspect can be found in Elia’s (1978) monograph *Per Saussure, contro Saussure: II “sociale” nelle teorie linguistiche del Novecento*.
7 Semiology is “[d]onc une science plus large que la linguistique” (‘[t]hus a science broader than linguistics’; E 277, B 8).
sémiologiques (‘semiological facts’; E 282, D 182, SM III 113, S 2.7).\(^8\) Saussure assumes that these are all sign systems and consequently, there must be common laws that govern them all, something that is shared by all kinds of sign systems, and of course, present in language as well. That is why, in accordance with Naville’s classification of sciences, semiology must belong to the so-called sciences de lois (‘sciences of laws’), more precisely, to its psychological part (Naville 1901: 23–39). These are exclusively theoretic sciences that focus on principles (theorems). In the case of semiology, these principles disclose themselves as psychological in nature, yet are not related to individual psychology. Semiological facts pertain to social psychology and are governed by socio-psychological laws (Naville 1901: 105–107).

3 Relation of linguistics to semiology

The relation of linguistics to semiology is one of the central problems in research on Saussure. Generally, scholars agree on the fact that the semiological dimension of language constitutes one of the central interests of the Swiss linguist. In a way, Saussure’s general linguistics (or as he preferred to put it, the science of language) may be considered as coinciding with his semiological project.\(^9\) The topic has been discussed at length by authors such as Avalle (1995: 31–76), Engler (1974, 1980), and Wunderli (1976: 42–44), and is elegantly summed up by Johannes Fehr:

Avec la sémiologie pour projet, avec cette entreprise difficile mais fascinante, d’introduire (à nouveau) le signe dans une linguistique qui lui avait donné congé en raison de sa réputation excessivement philosophique et spéculative, se trouve exprimé ce qui constitue tout à la fois la situation décalée de Saussure au sein de la linguistique et son importance dans l’histoire des idées, importance qui déborde largement son rôle de savant enfermé dans sa discipline. (Fehr 2000 [1995]: 49)

(‘With semiology as a project, with this difficult yet fascinating enterprise to (re)introduce the sign in a linguistic framework that has abandoned it due to its excessively philosophical and

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8 The phrases faits sémiologiques and institutions sémiologiques are some of the striking omissions on the part of Bally and Sechehaye.
9 The only author who rejects this view is, to my knowledge, Jean-Claude Milner, who claims that “contrairement à une légende tenace, il n’y a pas à proprement parler de théorie du signe chez Saussure” (contrary to a widespread legend, in fact, there is no theory of sign in Saussure”; Milner 2002: 25). This statement is supported by the argument that “Saussure ne se demande pas ce qu’est un signe” (“Saussure doesn’t ask himself the question: what is a sign”), and that he gives no proper definition of sign, but rather uses “une convention terminologique” (“a terminological convention”; Milner 2002: 25). However, it must be pointed out that Milner was working exclusively with the published version of the CLG, hence the air of triviality that he registered in the formulations presented by Bally and Sechehaye as “Saussure’s original thought” on signs.
speculative reputation, we find expressed the trait that constitutes both Saussure’s transformed situation at the core of linguistics, and his importance in the history of ideas, an importance that goes far beyond his role of a specialist limited to his own discipline.’

However, it is worth pointing out some thought-provoking details about the relation between (the ideal future) linguistics and the future general science of signs. At first, Saussure claims that semiology is supposed to be “broader than linguistics” (“une science plus large que la linguistique”; E 277, B 8) because it must encompass all other sign systems beyond natural language. This means that for Saussure, human signifying activity goes well beyond language, and to this extent, we can accept the attempts at interpreting Saussurean semiology as an early version of general semiotics. However, right after introducing the notion of semiology in his Second Course, Saussure underscores very carefully the fact that “[d]ans la sémiologie, la langue sera naturellement la science la plus importante” (‘[i]n semiology, [the science of] language will be, of course, the most important science’; E 290, G 1.2b):

Mais d’emblée, il faut dire que la langue occupera le compartiment principal de cette science; <elle en sera le patron général>. Mais ce sera par hasard: théoriquement, elle n’en sera qu’un cas particulier. (E 290, II R 12, SM II, 53)

(‘But from the outset, we must say that language will occupy the central compartment of this science; <it will be the patron of it all>. But this will be by accident: theoretically, it will be just another case.’)

Two central points must be highlighted here: language being the most important of all sign systems means that linguistics should be the model of every semiology. On the other hand, the opposite is also true – language is “just another” sign system; thus, linguistics should probably be only a form of special semiology. This mutual or double dependence between semiology and linguistics constitutes one of the key features of Saussure’s project for semiology, because it would mean that in fact semiology must be structured as linguistics. Why is this so important? We might assume that in developing a form of general linguistics, Saussure eventually developed a semiology. He points out that linguistics would be just a particular case of semiology, but nevertheless, probably, the most important one. Understanding the circular motion between linguistic and semiological speculation in Saussure’s thought (Fehr 2000 [1995]: 105–113)\(^\text{10}\) is essential to the reading of the material found in 1996, as we shall see later.

Manuscript material testifies that Saussure entertained the idea of semiology long before his courses in general linguistics (1906–1907), probably already about

\(^\text{10}\) In this respect, Fehr points out the influence of W. D. Whitney, as well as the fact that Saussure was probably researching these problems already around the year 1894 (Fehr 2000 [1995]: 110).
1881 when he composed a sketch on phonetics (Jakobson 1969). The term appears in other manuscript notes such as those on a course in Gothic held at the École des Hautes-Études in Paris in 1885–1886, and in the treatise On the Dual Essence of Language (to be discovered in 1996; Chidichimo 2014: 108–112). Still, it is difficult to assess the exact level of precision of the definition of both general linguistics (science of language), and semiology at this early point in the development of Saussure’s thought. The difficulties in the dating of Saussure’s manuscripts and the hesitations he had about the terms he preferred do not allow us an unequivocal interpretation of the relation between these two fields (to reflect this specificity of Saussurean terminology, Giuseppe Cosenza introduces the notion “semi-manufactured terminology” or terms in process of terminologization, Cosenza 2016a: 128, 2016b: 178; see also Chidichimo 2014: 103; Linda 1998: 223–249). So, one might suppose that the clear delineation of both general linguistics, and semiology, might have come only later, by the time of the three courses (after 1906), or even doubt that there is any clear delineation.

In his First Course in general linguistics (1907), Saussure barely mentions semiology, only twice in passing, in the context of the relation between the spoken and the written language, and under the form of the adjective sémiologique – speaking about “two semiological axes” (the system of the spoken language and that of the written language; Saussure 1996: 10–11). This could mean that the notion was still not very well defined for himself, either. A more detailed discussion on the notion of semiology then follows in the Second Course (1908–1909), where Saussure introduces the term systematically in the beginning of the course, defining semiology as “la science des signes qui nous fait connaître en quoi peuvent consister les signes, leur lois, etc.,” (“the science of signs that tells us what signs, their laws, etc., can consist of;” Saussure 1997: 113) and linking it directly to the notion of value.11 This is also visible in the development of the argument in the second part of the Third Course (1910–1911), where – only after discussing both linguistic geography and history – Saussure turns to basic theoretical questions, such as the nature of the linguistic sign (mentioning the notion semiology; Saussure and Constantin 2005). A very clear

11 It probably wouldn’t be too bold to suggest that Saussure designed the notion of value precisely with a view to replacing the neoclassicist concept of signification and the sign as a two-faced entity, with a more accurate concept of the signifying function. If we base our judgment on the material of the Second Course, Saussure understood the notion of value as synonymous with the notion of sign (Saussure 1997: 14: “Une système sémiologique d’une quantité d’unités … et la véritable nature de ces unités … c’est d’être des valeurs” [‘A semiological system with a certain amount of units … and the true nature of these units … is that of being values’]). The notion of value deserves by all means more detailed research that would locate it within the framework of late-nineteenth-century interest in the idea of value (e.g., in Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud), a task we cannot undertake here (see Amacker 1974; Jay 1987: 158–170).
bipartition is visible in the structure of this course: a polemic text sequence refuting language as nomenclature, along with the whole conceptual apparatus that supports it, and then – an affirmative section developing the theory of linguistic value. The marginal mentions of the notion semiology seem to confirm the statements about the relation of linguistics and semiology from the Second Course, namely, that as a science, semiology should be modeled after linguistics: “Aucune série de signes n’aura une importance plus considérable dans cette science [sc. la sémiologie] que celles des faits linguistiques” (‘No other series of signs will have a more considerable importance in this science [semiology] than those of linguistic facts’; E 282, C III 274). It becomes clear that linguistic facts are considered subsumable under the idea of a sign, and then elevated to the series with the most important role within the realm of human signifying activity. Thus, when speaking of science of language, Saussure actually constructs the model of semiology: “La sémiologie aura à voir si elle doit s’occuper des signes arbitraires ou des autres; son domaine sera plutôt celui des systèmes de signes arbitraires dont la langue est le principal exemple” (‘Semiology should consider whether it must focus on arbitrary signs or on some other kind; its realm would be rather that of the systems of arbitrary signs, of which language is the principal example’; C III 281).

4 On the Dual Essence of Language and its importance

In 1996, a discovery was made: a folder containing until then unknown manuscripts by Ferdinand de Saussure was found at the Hôtel de Tertasse, one of the mansions of the Saussure family in Geneva. The exact circumstances of this discovery are described by Vincent Barras who was the first to gain access to the archives of Raymond de Saussure (Amacker 2011: 9–10). The section of the archive that belonged to Ferdinand de Saussure included a number of separate notes developed in the manner typical of the Swiss linguist – a piling up of unsystematic thoughts and

12 This was probably one of the points in Saussure’s courses that were profoundly misinterpreted by Bally and Sechehaye, who generally reproduced a neoclassicist semiological dogma and then managed to bequeath it to the structuralist tradition under Saussure’s name (Stawarska 2015: 23–70).

13 We will limit the current discussion to indicating two questions which are essential to the understanding of the Saussurean project for semiology, without being able to elaborate further on them now: these are the notions of arbitrariness and of system. On the most important historical phases in understanding linguistic arbitrariness before and in Saussure, see Coseriu 1967, Culler 2002, and Joseph 2000.
observations.\textsuperscript{14} Since most of the folders in the batch bear the title \textit{De l’essence double du langage}, or a version of this phrase, some scholars assumed that these writings might have been meant for publication or even a preparation of an actual treatise – more systematic than almost all the rest of Saussure’s written texts. The notes have been dated to the early 1890s (probably between 1891 and 1894, i.e., to a very early point in Saussure’s career as a linguist) and, together with some additional notes, were published for the first time in 2002, edited by Simon Bouquet, Rudolf Engler, and Antoinette Weil, under the title \textit{De l’essence double du langage}, in the volume \textit{Écrits de linguistique générale}, where the editors make an attempt to reconstruct a possible systematic treatise.\textsuperscript{15} The new material was swiftly integrated in research on Saussure’s legacy, and a critical edition of the materials was prepared by René Amacker and published in 2011 under the title \textit{De la double essence du langage} with the more general designation \textit{Science du langage} (Saussure 2011). Amacker provides detailed information about the condition of the notes and the general composition of the folders and files in the archive (Amacker 2011: 17–26) and rearranges the fragments with respect to Saussure’s own, albeit sparse, indications (Amacker 2011: 31–32). However, it is important to note that neither Engler’s, nor Amacker’s arrangement could be accepted as the original order intended by Saussure, nor that we are in fact presented with the text of an unfinished treatise. In both cases, the order is provided by the editors while the condition of the folders makes it practically impossible to give an exact assessment of the original order or of the exact significance of the manuscript within the Saussurean corpus. A substantial contribution to the reception of the presumed treatise was the commented German edition of 2003 by Ludwig Jäger (Saussure and Jäger 2003), as well as the commented Italian translation of 2005 by Tullio De Mauro (Saussure and De Mauro 2005b).

Especially interesting here is a volume of 2016, edited by François Rastier and entitled “\textit{De l’essence double du langage} et le renouveau du saussurisme,” which makes an overall review of the materials discovered so far and offers a detailed reassessment of the whole Saussurean doctrine in the light of the latest findings. While reassessing the status and the importance of the manuscript entitled \textit{De l’essence double du langage} (ED), Rastier claims that this text presents “un traité de linguistique qui dans une rédaction assez continue expose des principes théoriques et méthodologiques ordonnés par un projet unitaire” (‘a treatise in linguistics that

\textsuperscript{14} On the condition of Saussure’s manuscript legacy and the challenges to be confronted in the editorial process, see Chidichimo 2018.

\textsuperscript{15} Serious critiques were raised against the editorial principles adopted in this volume (Chidichimo 2018; Rastier 2016: 11–30). Amacker (2011: 18) explains the situation with the editor’s need to compile a book for a broader audience. Chidichimo also expresses the very interesting hypothesis that some of the previously known manuscript materials by Saussure must be read as sections taken from the corpus of \textit{De l’essence double}. 
develops in a fairly continuous manner some theoretical and methodological principles intended to serve a unitary project; Rastier 2016: 15), a statement that could hardly be supported by the archive materials. Yet, Rastier successfully highlights some of the important aspects of Saussure’s linguistic and semiological thought:

Post-structuraliste à sa manière, Saussure élabore le projet rationnel de la linguistique mais le fonde ainsi dans une herméneutique de la complexité … Cette gnoseologie est fondée d’une part sur une préconception non substantialiste du réel. (Rastier 2016: 18)16

(A poststructuralist of his own kind, Saussure develops a rational project of linguistics, but anchoring it in a hermeneutics of complexity … This gnoseology is based partially on a non-substantialist conception of the real.)

The anti-essentialist (or, as Rastier puts it, anti-ontological) charge of Saussure’s thought is pointed out here with the strongest possible emphasis. Similar features in Saussure’s thought have been noted and made use of in numerous studies on the linguist’s legacy, but he has never been so explicitly defined as a poststructuralist.17 In the present study, we would prefer to use the term “pre-structuralist” as a suitable substitute for Rastier’s phrase “post-structuraliste à sa manière.” The connotations of the adjective pre-structuralist are to be understood along the lines of an approach that precedes structuralism and is in this sense non-structuralist or even counter-structuralist. So, the concept pre-structuralist is not intended to convey the meaning of something that anticipates structuralism.18 At the same time, it is to be thought of as related to actual structuralism in a manner very similar to the one in which poststructuralist tendencies are related to structuralism – not as a simple opposition and negation, but as a further development of structuralism, taking a next step in the same direction and accepting the inevitable consequences in an Aufhebung-type of movement. Pre-structuralism should be then a form of reversed or countertemporal Aufhebung of structuralism. From that perspective, we should posit the question of those elements of Saussure’s linguistic-semiological doctrine that ED could reveal as new to the contemporary reader; and next, how they could change our perception of human signifying activity in general.

16 On this topic, see also Rastier (2002).
17 The re-evaluation of Saussure’s relation to structuralism started generally after Jean Starobinski’s partial publication of the notebooks on the anagrams in 1964 (Starobinski 1964, 1971). From the point of view of the newly discovered manuscripts, Saussure’s thought started showing traits more similar to that of a poststructuralist than of an orthodox structuralist. This led to a reassessment of Saussure’s legacy by authors like Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, etc. (Wunderli 1972: 113–138).
18 Although this is the traditional way of understanding Saussure’s position in respect to structuralism (Eco 2002 [1968]; Milner 2002: 15–43; Paolucci 2010; Segre 1969).
The manuscript presents us with a theory of the nature of the linguistic sign, that we do not encounter in Saussure’s later manuscripts or in the three courses in general linguistics (1906–1911). Although some of its aspects could be reconstructed from other extant sources, mainly from Saussure’s notes and writings in general linguistics and on the Germanic legends, the version here includes some hitherto unknown moments that still remain not fully appreciated despite the increasing scholarly interest in the text. Weighing up the data from this manuscript against the backdrop of the already researched sign theory from the CLG and other manuscript notes, that came chronologically later, we can notice some important elements that could help us in a threefold way. First, the earlier version gives us the opportunity to develop an alternative theoretical model of semiosis – and especially of verbal semiosis, the semiosis in natural languages. Basically, this will help us provide answers to the seminal semiotic question of how meaning is produced that cannot be inferred from the courses in general linguistics. Second, as a consequence of the first point, it would procure a different understanding of hermeneutics, since knowing how signification comes about entails a certain reverse procedure of reading and interpreting meaning. And third, such an enterprise is a step towards restoring the importance of natural language and language theory in the field of general semiotics. These questions are going to be kept henceforth on the systematic level of the analysis, since the uncertainty of the chronology of the archive materials, as well as Saussure’s own doubts and hesitations that are reflected in the state of his manuscript materials do not allow us to formulate a conclusive statement about Saussure’s own final attitude towards these seminal semiological questions. The conceptual divergence of the earlier writings as compared to the later notes and the courses might be due to an inner development of Saussure’s thought or to the requirements of an introductory course for students – at this point, it is difficult to decide. Nevertheless, the conceptual elaboration of problems of general semiology in their version from On the Dual Essence could give way to alternative readings on the level of systematic semiology that still can contribute to a better understanding of the meaning-producing processes.

Assuming that for Saussure, a future linguistic theory (the theory of language as it should be, not as it was practiced at his time) is supposed to be interchangeable
with general semiology (De Angelis 2022b), we shall address the most central of all linguistic questions according to Saussure: the question of the actual linguistic units. This is in fact an epistemological (or as Rastier prefers to call it, gnoseological) question and concerns the object of linguistic science. As Saussure notices at a very early point in his academic activity, the difference between linguistics and other sciences is that the objects of linguistics do not preexist the activity of the linguist. We are unable to speak of linguistic facts as existing objectively in the world (like geological, biological, or chemical facts), the research of which would form the scientist’s task. The objects of linguistics are practically created by the very activity of the linguist who is approaching them. Around the year 1900, this radically constructivist thesis was in fact something unusual and original. This strong anti-essentialist foundation of Saussure’s initial position towards the linguistic object could be detected throughout his research and teaching, but remained obscured by the edition of 1916 of the CLG by Bally and Sechehaye.21

Saussure’s point of departure in the treatise On the Dual Essence is the claim that it is the gaze of the linguist that creates linguistic objects, and not vice versa. He introduces his central idea about the point of view as a dimension of particular importance.22 From this starting point, Saussure posits as his basic claim the following hypothesis: linguistic entities exist, and they can be scientifically determined.23 The delimitation and determination of what is to be perceived as a linguistic fact is now envisioned as the first and central objective of any serious theory of language: “ce qui est essentiel, c’est le problème des unités” (‘the essential thing is the problem of units’; SM 30). Many scholars have drawn attention to the fact that Saussure regarded the existence and the definition of linguistic units as a fundamental, but very uncertain, element of linguistics. Simon Bouquet (2016: 82–84), for example, supports the idea of identifying language units, linguistic objects, and semiological units. Thus, a single movement of delimitation would enable us to discover all three of them: the elements of language, the scientific object of linguistics, and the definition of the object of the new discipline of semiology. We read in the Second Course:

21 The structure of the Third Course allows for it to be inferred, but not as clearly as in the initial sections of ED.
22 Not only the point of view but also the point of departure in any linguistic research was regarded by Saussure as an obstacle to any linguistic pursuit. The most telling example about this problem is the famous fragment “Unde exoriar?,” or ‘Where should I start from?’, in Ms. fr. 3952/4b, 4r–5r, opening with the explicit statement that “il n’y a pas un seul point qui soit l’évident point de départ” (‘there is not just a single, evident point of departure’; Marchese 1985: 90; Prosdocimi 1983: 70).
23 We will only mention in passing the debate between Avalle and Engler on the existence of linguistic entities. Avalle’s claim that signs do not exist has specific content and is to be taken more aporetically and not literally, as Engler does (Avalle 1995; Engler 1974, 1980).
La linguistique aurait pour tâche de délimiter quelles sont <réellement> ces unités valables de tout genre. <On ne peut pas dire qu'elle s'en soit rendu compte, car elle n'a fait que discuter sur des unités mal définies.> Non seulement cette détermination des unités qu'elle manie sera la tâche la plus pressante de la linguistique, mais ce faisant elle aura rempli sa tâche tout entière. (Saussure 1997: 20)

(‘The task of linguistics should be to determine what its legitimate units of every type really are. We cannot say that it has ever taken this into account, because it has always discussed only units that have been wrongly defined. Not only is this determination of units which it performs the most urgent task of linguistics, but in doing so, linguistics would practically accomplish its entire task.’)

Bouquet identifies these units with semiological units (signs) based on Saussure’s claim that “[l]a signification seule permet de délimiter les unités!” (‘[o]nly signification allows us to delimit the units!’; E 1802, B 25). Moreover, the signifying language unit should in fact be defined not as a unity of an acoustic image and mental concept,24 as we are usually told, not even as a twofold entity composed of signifier and signified, but as a value (Bouquet 2016: 84–85). Language should be thus interpreted as a system of values that determine each other mutually.

Although we are not going to discuss Saussure’s notion of value in detail here, we will accept it as a central element of the theory of language as a signifying system, as a pinnacle of Saussure’s discussion on the tasks of the science de langage. In the Second and the Third Course he establishes that “je ne fais pas de différence fondamentale entre: une valeur, une identité, une unité, une réalité (sens linguistique), un élément concret linguistique” (‘I don’t make an essential difference between: a value, an identity, a unit, a reality [in a linguistic sense], a concrete linguistic element’; E 1803, B 31). Although these notions must be carefully distinguished from one another, they are established as the basic series, as the terminological inventions Saussure regarded as his actual contribution to general linguistics.

4.1 Semiology in On the Dual Essence of Language

In the perspective of the discussion on the definition of the fundamental signifying elements of language, On the Dual Essence provides us with additional material that cannot be found in the later versions of the same argument. The project of semiology is not only present in this early work – it is central and may be summed up in four points: (1) signs are complex objects; (2) as such, signs are composed of relations; (3) signs are composed of relations that have the formal structure of an analogy (a–b equals c–d); (4) every sign relation implies the mediation of the whole signifying

24 See the critique on this point by Fehr (2000 [1995]: 15–49), and especially Stawarska (2015: 23–70).
system at every single point of semiotic production. Our discussion will be centered exclusively on the last point, since the first three can and have been discerned by scholars on the basis of the materials for the CLG and other notes.

As a point of departure, the argument establishes the idea that linguistic objects are not immediately observable and need to be in the first place defined:

La linguistique rencontre-t-elle d’avant elle, comme objet premier et immédiate, un objet donné, un ensemble de choses qui tombent sous le sens, comme c’est le cas pour la physique, la chimie, la botanique, l’astronomie, etc.? En aucune façon et à aucun moment: elle est placée à l’extrême opposée des sciences qui peuvent partir de la donnée des sens. (ELG 2c: 20–21; SL 36: 83–84).

(‘Does linguistics confront as a primary and immediate object a given object, a cluster of things that affect the senses, as in the case of physics, chemistry, botany, astronomy, etc.? In no manner and at no time at all: linguistics is situated at the extreme opposite of all the sciences that can start from the givens of the senses.’)

The (scientific) object of linguistics is not given, which has two consequences – this object is not singular, and it is first to be defined before being researched. At this point Saussure introduces his central methodological principle: the idea of point de vue (‘the point of view’). It is the point of view that creates the object. Linguistics is thus presenting itself as a science that first constructs its objects before approaching them scientifically. This epistemological stance is perceived by Saussure as somewhat paradoxical (in comparison to other positive sciences), yet he insists on it and at the same time rejects scientific arbitrariness by establishing sound criteria for the initial process. He introduces a quadruple system of linguistic viewpoints, thus obtaining four levels of legitimate linguistic study: the synchronic level (presented as equal to semiology), the diachronic level, the anachronic level (equal to etymology), and the historical level (ELG 2e: 21–22; SL 41: 94–96). Each level is a specific form of envisaging language, and consequently, each of these four levels develops its own objects of study, its own units. The relation between the levels is far from clearly articulated, a lot of questions could be raised about this four-partition, and Saussure himself doesn’t clarify it extensively enough. But the main point here is that linguistics proceeds by first picking a point of view, then defining the object with respect to the chosen point of view, and only afterwards researching it.

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25 As we have already pointed out, it is difficult to make an unequivocally certain statement about the order of the fragments if the manuscripts form ED. Therefore, we will provide both the numeration developed by Engler, and the one from Amacker’s edition in brackets. However, both editors seem to agree that it appropriate to locate the question of the nature of the linguistic units and the one of the points of view at the front of the argument.

26 Another reading of the logic of the four valid points of view is present in Joseph (2012: 382–384). Joseph identifies the fourth point of view as the future “diachronic level,” although Saussure explicitly uses the term with relation to the second one (ELG 2e: 21; SL 41: 94).
As we can clearly see here with regard to the notion of *semiology*, it emerges on the level of the synchronic point of view (here named also *instantané* ['instantaneous']; ELG 2e: 21; SL 41: 94). Thus, we can assume that originally, it was an earlier version of what was later to become *synchronic linguistics* (sometimes appearing as *idiosynchronic*). Since the word *semiology* is a neologism, we would propose the hypothesis that it was born precisely in the discussion on the four points of view – as a counterpart of the anachronic level, also called *etymology*. On the level of word formation, *semiology* and *etymology* are analogous constructions. So, we can think of the concept of semiology as a linguistic innovation that uses the mechanism of analogy, as Saussure describes it (Stawarska 2022).

So far, the discussion is primarily polemic, that is, negating rather than affirming a certain situation about linguistics. But Saussure directly introduces his main hypothesis: the dual essence of language. Fragment ELG 2d/SL 37,28 formulates in a similarly negative way the basic idea of language duality. We can read in this paragraph a confirmation of Avalle’s, Fehr’s, and Stawarska’s critique against the idea that Saussure’s sign theory represents signs as entities composed of two elements, signifier and signified, or – in other terms – acoustic image and concept. With the help of *On the Dual Essence*, we are now able to see that such a representation is not only partially, but completely false and scientifically superficial, since Saussure clearly points out that:


> (*The profound dualism that divides language is not situated in the dualism of sound and idea, of vocal phenomenon and mental phenomenon; this is the easy and pernicious way to perceive it.*

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27 That the dual essence of language is to be perceived as a central problem of this text, cannot be inferred solely from the title since again, this title was chosen by the editors Engler and Bouquet (ELG, 2002), and not by the author himself. The state of the twelve folders of Arch. de Saussure 372 in Bibliothèque de Genève as described by René Amacker suggests that Saussure had hesitations about the title – it varies between *De l’essence double*, *De la double essence* or just *De l’essence* (Amacker 2011: 17–18). However, the idea of duality and its clarification practically permeates the manuscript, so it does make sense to choose it as a prism for the reading of the whole document. The edition by Amacker (2011) preserves the privileged position of duality by formulating the title as *De la double essence du langage*. Amacker also decided not to add subtitles to the fragments, as Engler and Bouquet did.

28 Amacker’s edition adds an element to this fragment that lacks in Engler’s – Saussure notes at the upper left margine “À conserver” (*Keep this*; SL: 86).
This dualism is situated in the duality of the vocal phenomenon AS SUCH and the vocal phenomenon AS A SIGN – of the physical (objective) fact and the physical-mental (subjective) fact, and in no way [in the duality] of the “physical” fact of sound as opposed to the “mental” fact of signification.’

This fragment is seminal for understanding what constitutes the objectives of the whole treatise, and we are going to come back to it later. For the moment, it is important to note that Saussure rejects a traditional representation of the nature of semiotic phenomena, the so-called “nomenclature” (E 1085, CLG 99; Fehr 2000 [1995]: 126–127; Stawarska 2015: 31–47): the idea that language is simply a way of distributing etiquettes to each object in the surroundings, the model of Adam giving names to the animals that have been created by somebody else and that he finds already present there before him.29 Taking this critical position as a starting point for his argument, Saussure understands his objective as the development of a new understanding of signifying activity.

We can provisionally designate Saussure’s approach as “systematism” (Sofia 2017). This term is intended to express Saussure’s attitude towards linguistics more adequately than the term “structuralism.” The role of the system in the signifying process may be designated as a mediating role. As we have seen earlier, a language unit as a linguistic object is not immediately accessible and needs the mediation of the point of view:

Rappelons-nous en effet que l’objet n’existe pas pour commencer, n’est pas déterminé en lui-même. Des lors parler d’un objet, nommer un objet, ce n’est pas autre chose que d’invoquer un point de vue A déterminé. (ELG 3b: 23; SL 40: 90)

(‘Let us recall that in fact the object does not exist from the outset, it is not determined in itself. From this point onwards, to speak of an object, to name an object is nothing else but to evoke a determined point of view A.’)

Taking the semiological (idiosyncratic or simultaneous) point of view, Saussure advances his proposal for transformation of the traditional bipartition of linguistic signs into a signifying aspect (here named sign, but later known as signifier) and a signified notion (or “thing,” here called signification, later – the signified), in an attempt to define the limits and functioning of a semiological entity:

[En réalité il n’y a dans le langage aucune détermination ni de l’idée ni de la forme ; il n’y a d’autre détermination que celle de l’idée par la forme et celle de la forme par l’idée. La première expression de la réalité serait de dire que la langue (c’est-à-dire, le sujet parlant) n’aperçoit ni l’idée a, ni la forme A, mais seulement le rapport \( \frac{a}{A} \); cette expression serait encore tout à fait grossière. Il n’aperçoit vraiment que le rapport entre le deux rapports \( \frac{\alpha}{\alpha} \) et \( \frac{\beta}{\beta} \), ou \( \frac{b}{b} \) et \( \frac{b}{b} \), etc. (ELG 6e: 39; SL 79: 156)

29 In an autograph note, Saussure gives precisely the example of the biblical Adam: E 1085, N 23.3.
In fact, in language, there is no determination either of an idea, or of a form; there is only the determination of an idea through a form and of a form through an idea. The first expression of reality would be to say that language (that is, the speaking subject) perceives neither the idea \( a \), nor the form \( A \), but only the relation \( a_A \); however, this expression would be in fact too imprecise. Actually, it only perceives the relation between two relations: \( a_{AHZ} \) and \( a_{ABC} \), \( b_{BRS} \) and \( b_{BKR} \), etc.,

This formulation is one of the most interesting inventions in this early text of Saussure’s. It directly addresses the core of the signifying relation in language. Apart from practically identifying langue (‘language’) with le sujet parlant (‘the speaking subject’) and refuting once again the immediacy of the relation between signans and signatum, Saussure proposes an alternative. We shall designate his alternative as a mediation through the system. Something that becomes visible in this manuscript (although inferable also from later writings) is the fact that for Saussure, the starting point of a semiological system would never be the singular sign. The logic of a semiological system is that the system is not the result of a building procedure, and that its elements, the signs, do not preexist the whole of the system in a manner that allows them to be combined afterwards in a system. The signifying process begins with the system, and only afterwards can we speak of its building elements. That is what Saussure means by the idea that “la langue est un système serré” (‘language is a closed system’; SM 29).

This constitution of language as a system is represented in the Third Course by a telling comparison, unfortunately misrepresented by Saussure’s first editors Bally and Sechehaye.

On pourrait comparer l’entité linguistique à un corps chimique composé, ainsi l’eau, où il y a de l’hydrogène et de l’oxygène: \(<H_2O>\). Sans doute, la chimie, si elle sépare les éléments, a de l’oxygène et de l’hydrogène, mais l’on reste dans l’ordre chimique. Au contraire, si on décompose l’eau linguistique <en prenant l’hydrogène et l’oxygène>, on quitte l’ordre linguistique <on n’a plus d’entité linguistique>. Ce n’est que pour autant que subsiste l’association que nous sommes devant l’objet concret linguistique. (E 1699, III C 289)

30 In some manuscript notes from the Second Course we find a statement (omitted by the editors Bally and Sechehaye) that the way of understanding semiological duality is the most difficult aspect of semiology: “Ce rapport des signes à la pensée est précisément ce qu’est le signe = <non pas la suite des syllabes mais> être double constitué par une suite de syllabes dans la mesure où on y attache une signification déterminée. Le signe est double: signification/<syllabes>: c’est <la le point le plus> difficile <de la sémiologie, et ce côté aura été négligé aussi par la manière indiquée d’envisager la question>” (‘This relation of signs to thought is exactly what a sign is = <not the sequence of syllables, but> a double entity constituted by a sequence of syllables to the extent that a determined signification has been attributed to them. The sign is double: signification/<syllabes>: that is <the most> difficult <point of semiology, one that has been neglected even by the above-mentioned approach to the question>”; E 1834, II R 22, SM II 55).
We can compare the linguistic entity to a chemical compound, such as water, where there is hydrogen and oxygen: \( \text{H}_2\text{O} \). No doubt, if chemistry separates the elements, there will be oxygen and hydrogen, but still, one will remain within the order of chemistry. On the contrary, if we decompose the linguistic water \( \text{deriving hydrogen and oxygen} \), we immediately leave the order of linguistics, \( \text{we won't have a linguistic entity anymore} \). It is only as long as the association [between those elements] persists that we face a concrete linguistic object.\(^{31}\)

So, the semiological system language is a composite entity that, paradoxically, cannot be decomposed down to its elements because they don’t exist outside the system. The signifying system is the very mechanism that produces the elements, and it always produces the signifier alongside the signified. Signifier and signified clearly always go together, belong to each other – like the two faces of a sheet of paper.\(^{32}\) So, in a way, the relations produce the terms, and are not simply established between them. This moment is a long-lasting structuralist postulate that for some reason becomes easily forgotten in practical terms. We can find it in the manuscript sources for the Third Course:

Reprise du schéma : signifié-signifiant. Cette figure a sa raison d’être, mais n’est qu’un produit secondaire de la valeur. Pour que le rapport entre signifiant et signifié fût donné en soi, il faudrait que le signifié fût déterminé d’avance, et il ne l’est pas. [Exemples…]. Le schéma n’est donc qu’une manière d’exprimer l’existence d’une certaine valeur circonscrite dans le système par opposition à d’autres termes ; il n’est pas initial dans la langue. (III SM 91)

(‘Let us take again the diagram: signifier – signified. This figure has its reasons, but it is only a secondary product of value. For the relation between signifier and signified to be given in itself, the signified should have been determined in advance, and it is not. [Examples…]. The diagram is thus only a way of expressing a certain value circumscribed within the system by opposition to other terms; it is not initial in language.’)

The relation of signifier and signified, clearly designated as value, excludes the possibility for a signified (as well as a signifier) to be pre-given. The signified emerges

\(^{31}\) This is the version of the comparison as given in the notes of Émile Constantin from the Third Course. In CLG the conclusion that after decomposing the “linguistic water,” we find ourselves outside linguistics, unlike chemistry which remains chemistry even on the level of the elements (a conclusion that is the point of the whole comparison), is replaced by the conclusion that after decomposing water, we are left with the elements which no longer have the properties of water, an expression nowhere to be found in the manuscripts (see E 1699, CLG 149).

\(^{32}\) “La langue est encore comparable a une feuille de papier; la pensée est le recto et le son le verso; on ne peut découper sans découper en même temps le verso” (‘Language is comparable to a sheet of paper; thought is the recto, and sound is the verso; you cannot cut the recto without cutting the verso too’; E 1833; CLG 163). The formulation of the editors is more detailed than the manuscript versions, where there is no explicit determination of which face of the sheet of paper represents the thought, and which the sound. An interesting topological interpretation of this figure as a Möbius strip is given by Lo Piparo (1991).
in the process of establishing differences which are both on the level of the signifier and on that of the signified. Nothing is given in language except differences. Since differences can emerge only within a series of elements (at least two), the multiplicity of a language system should precede the singular sign:

[I]Il n’y a de donné que la diversité des signes combinée indissolublement et d’une façon infiniment complexe avec la diversité des idées. Les deux chaos, en s’unissant, donnent un ordre. Il n’y a rien de plus vain que de vouloir établir l’ordre en les séparant. (ELG 11: 51–52; SL 75: 143)

(‘[T]here is nothing given except the diversity of signs combined indissolubly and in an infinitely complex manner with the diversity of ideas. In uniting themselves, the two chaoses give an order. There is nothing more futile than the attempt to establish an order by separating them.’)

This impossibility to disentangle the level of the signifier and the level of the signified paradoxically renders their mutual relation very unstable, since the smallest change would affect the whole of the system.\textsuperscript{33} Furthermore, if signifier and signified should be always negatively present as differences, any analysis of the nature of this mysterious connection between the two chaoses, of the complexity of the relation between the signifier and the signified, cannot possibly focus on the singular sign – signs should always be considered in the entirety of their number, given that every element included affects the whole. If we try to single out a positive component, it will slip back into the chaos and we will lose it as a linguistic entity.

Understanding the complex nature of semiological relations would mean keeping all these conditions in mind. So, in semiological linguistics we should always address the whole of the system. That is why, in Saussure’s view, a proper answer to the question of signification will never be found as long as we keep asking it under the heading of the relation between signifier and signified, because any such attempt falls back into nomenclature. Then we should frame the question differently.

### 4.2 The final quaternion

So far, we have introduced Saussure’s new interpretation of the linguistic duality: the division between “the vocal phenomenon AS SUCH and the vocal phenomenon AS A

\textsuperscript{33} All interpreters of Saussure’s thought draw attention to the importance of the temporal dimension in the “life of language.” Diachrony of language circulation was, for Saussure, one of the central problems that a serious linguistic science was supposed to address. A monograph dedicated to this problem has been published by Yong-ho Choi, \textit{Le problème du temps chez Ferdinand de Saussure} (2002). Apart from this, on the basis of Saussure’s manuscripts at Harvard, Herman Parret has reconstructed a Saussurean theory of time (Parret 1994: 1–50).
SIGN” (ELG 2d: 20; SL 37: 87), understood as a revision of the traditional distinction between sound and meaning. This expression is far from clear, and although some scholars notice its importance, very few manage to appreciate the actual scale and meaning of this new proposition. In the first place, it means that the dividing line between the levels of the semiological system is traced differently: it generally divides the semiological level of language (the entire complex of signifying relations) from the material level (pure sound). It is in this perspective that the question of what the actual signifying relations are is formulated in the section designated by Engler as 6e (p. 39), and by Amacker as frg. 79 (p. 154).

In this fragment, a peculiar quasi-mathematical formula is introduced to explain what the speaking subject perceives as a sign: neither the two faces of sound and meaning, nor even the relation between those two faces, but “the relation between two relations: a/AHZ and abc/A, or b/BRS and blr/B.”

This mathematical expression that resembles the structure of the traditional analogy (of the type “a–b equals c–d”) needs further clarification through collation with other sections of the text that touch upon the same problem. In the manuscript, the formula “a/AHZ and abc/A, or b/BRS and blr/B, etc.” appears in relation to other attempts at formulating the inner structure of the signifying element (Bibliothèque de Genève, Arch. de Saussure 372/2–8: 57–58). At the same point in the text, Saussure introduces one of his terminological innovations: the notion of final quaternion. It appears capitalized on page 57:

Nous sommes toujours ramenés aux quatre termes irréductibles et aux trois rapports irréductibles entre eux ne formant qu’un seul tout pour l’esprit: (un signe/sa signification) = (un signe/un autre signe) et de plus = (une signification/une autre signification). C’est là ce que nous appelons le QUATERNION FINAL et, en considérant les quatre termes dans leurs rapports: le triple rapport irréductible. (ELG 6e: 39; SL 79: 154)

34 For example, Utaker (2016) discusses the transformation in the perception of a language system that Saussure’s new formulation entails, but in the end fails to effectively replace the traditional understanding of the linguistic duality with the new one and reproduces the old bipartition of sound and meaning.

35 This is one of the fragments where the two editors’ decisions diverge a lot – Engler inserts it after a discussion of phonetics and morphology and right before introducing the final quaternion, while Amacker decides to include it after the quaternion scheme, so that in his case it could be read not as an introduction or some premise to the scheme, but the other way around, as its clarification.

36 It is hard to assess what the actual order of the paragraphs of the text must have been, given the condition of the sheets in the folder. The editorial decisions might look to some extent spurious, but the original material is so chaotic that probably any proposed rearrangement would appear equally problematic.

37 In this case, we stick to the order of the text as it appears in Ms. Arch. de Saussure 372/2–8: 56–57 and in Amacker’s edition, not as in Engler’s edition where the whole fragment is reordered. The manuscript develops this idea in a couple of paragraphs that seem to be repetitive attempts to
We are always brought back to four irreducible terms and to three irreducible relations between them, which form one single whole for the mind: (a sign / its signification) = (a sign / another sign) and further = (a signification / another signification). This is what we call the FINAL QUATERNION and, with respect to the four terms in their relations: the triple irreducible relation.

The notion of quaternion stems from nineteenth-century mathematics, more precisely to the work of William Rowan Hamilton (1805–1865; Saussure and De Mauro 2005b: 37, n. 47), but Saussure adapts it to propose a non-classical explanation of the relation between the signifier and the signified. Researching the mathematical origins of Saussure’s notion of quaternion, Tomaso Russo Cardona demonstrates that William Hamilton’s terminological invention of 1835 of a four-element complex number allows a four-dimensional system, or a four-dimensional space, to be conceived of; when applied to linguistic material, it could represent the temporal, dynamic aspect of language in combination with the synchronic, semiological one (Russo Cardona 2008: 90–92). Further, Russo Cardona supposes that Saussure must have acquired the notion through the work of Hermann Grassmann (1809–1877), whose writings he knew well (2008: 87–88). On the other hand, in his thorough biography of Saussure, John Joseph examines in depth the relationship between Ferdinand and one of his brothers, René de Saussure, a mathematician, by showing that many of the linguist’s mathematical ideas (such as difference and value) could be traced back to the communication he had with his brother (Joseph 2012: 365–368). René’s central area of interest were multidimensional spaces developed first by Bernhard Riemann, as well as the problem of difference. He also introduced Ferdinand to J. B. Stallo’s book The Concepts and Theories of Modern Physics (1882) where the idea of “metageometry” was developed, a discipline that links geometry to physics precisely by adding dimensions like time, energy, or mass to the traditional Euclidean three-dimensional space (Joseph 2012: 366). Although when commenting on The Dual Essence of Language Joseph doesn’t explore the quaternion (2012: 380–384), we can infer that here again, René’s involvement with metageometrical spaces was the ground for Ferdinand’s employment of the term “quaternion.” Furthermore, the correspondence between the two brothers regarding these matters refers to the same period, 1890–1891, when Ferdinand was working on The Dual Essence, and René published a paper on metageometry (Joseph 2012: 366).

Nevertheless, as Russo underlines, Saussure’s usage of the term “quaternion” differs a lot from the original mathematical meaning, although remaining to a certain extent rooted in it (Russo Cardona 2008: 89). As a complex number, the Saussurean quaternion is a compound of elements and relations. There is a relation

formulate and explain the same thing in different versions. Such a situation is not uncommon for Saussure’s manuscripts.
of two relations: three irreducible relations and four terms. However, it is of crucial importance – regarding the ontology of the semiological process – to keep in mind that the relations are not posterior to the existence of the four terms.

The internal composition of these relations so that they could form “one single whole for the mind” is also complex and involves a hierarchy: the three relations are not of the same order. Two of them are of the type we call paratactic relations, that is, relations between elements of the same order: a sign and a sign; a signification and a signification. These two paratactic relations construct a hypotactic relation, that is, a link between elements of different orders: the relation of a sign to its signification.  

Taken a step further, these three relations constitute the four terms from the formula of the signifying analogy “$a/\text{AHZ}$ and $abc/A$, or $b/\text{BRS}$ and $b\text{lr}/B$, etc.” It is indeed difficult to decipher what concepts stand behind this formal notation, but we can base our reading on the contrast between the relation $a/A$, defined by Saussure as the perception of the relation between an idea and a form that is to be understood as still all too imprecise, and the correction he makes: the more adequate formulation would establish that the speaking subject perceives as signifying entity the relation between the relation of the idea $a$ and a series of forms AHZ, and the relation between a series of ideas $abc$ and a form A (then the example with $b$ follows). This more elaborate formulation suggests that the idea $a$ is unable to directly relate to the form that could convey it (A). Instead, it relates to a series of forms (designated as AHZ), only one of which will be the form that belongs to the idea in question. On the other hand, the form A relates to a series of ideas ($abc$), only one of which is the idea that will be associated with the form A. So, the idea $a$ and the form A reach each other only through the two asymmetrical and heterogenous series $abc$ and AHZ.

What are these series, and are they limited, or are the chosen symbols only marking the beginnings of potentially unlimited series? In a summarizing paragraph marked in the margin of the manuscript by the indication *Capital* (p. 57), Saussure explains the formula like this:

> Ce n’est pas la même chose, comme on le croit souvent, de parler du rapport de la forme et de l'idée, ou du rapport de l'idée et de la forme: parce que si l'on prend pour base la forme A on embrassera plus ou moins exactement un certain nombre d'idées $a\ b\ c$; (rapport $abc/A$) et si l'on prend pour base l'idée $a$ on embrassera plus ou moins exactement un certain nombre de formes AHZ (rapport $a/\text{AHZ}$). (ELG 6e: 40; SL 79: 154–155)

(‘It is not the same thing, as people usually believe, to speak about a relation between the form and the idea, or about a relation between the idea and the form: because, if we take the form A as

38 In the terms of Charles Morris, the first two relations would be envisioned as syntactic, and the third one as semantic.
our basis, we will encompass, more or less exactly, a certain number of ideas \(a b c\) (relation \(abc/A\)); and if we take the idea \(a\) as our basis, we will encompass, more or less exactly, a certain number of forms \(\text{AHZ}\) (relation \(a/\text{AHZ}\)).

Both the series of ideas and of forms must be understood as series of indefinite scale and uncertain limits – they are “more or less exactly,” “a certain number of.” It seems then, that if the idea \(a\) and the form \(A\) should ever manage to find each other, this would be only through the reference of both of them to an uncertain section taken from the sphere of the opposite realm – forms and ideas, respectively.

Expressed in this manner, the signifying relation is neither a substitution, nor a representation. We would rather describe the nature of the semiological relation by the term *mediation.*\(^{39}\) Now, to understand the essence of this mediated relation, we need to take a closer look at the mediating process and its characteristic traits. At a next step, we could also approach the dimension of materiality (“the vocal phenomenon AS SUCH”).

### 4.3 The self-mediating system

On pages 64–65 of the manuscript (Bibliothèque de Genève, Arch. de Saussure 372/2–8) Saussure revisits the problem of the relation of the signifier and the signified. He comes back to the four-sided entity of the quaternion:

> Comment saisir l’extrême malentendu qui domine les raisonnements sur le langage ? On pose qu’il existe des termes *doubles* comportant une forme, un corps, un être phonétique – et une signification, une idée, une chose spirituelle. Nous disons d’abord que la *forme* est la même chose que la *signification*, et que cet être-là est quadruple. (SL 77: 148; parallel with modifications in ELG 7: 42)

(‘How can we grasp this extreme misunderstanding that dominates the reflections on language? It is usually stated that there are double terms connecting a form, a body, a phonetic entity – and a signification, an idea, a mental thing. We say, first, that *form* is the same thing as *signification*, and that the whole entity is in fact quadruple.’)

This extremely intriguing statement which explicitly identifies *form* and *idea* is followed by a diagram contrasting the traditional view of the sign as a two-faced entity, and the new conception proposed by Saussure (Figures 1–3).

Apart from rejecting the traditional idea of the sign as a two-faced entity, this diagram displays an alternative formulation of the basic constellation (three irreducible relations, four irreducible terms). What appeared in the earlier

\(^{39}\) For a similar suggestion, see Rastier 2002.
Vue habituelle :
A Signification
B Forme

Vue proposée :

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Différence générale des significations (n’exist que selon la différence des formes).</td>
<td>Une signification (relative à une forme)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Différence générale des formes (n’existant que selon la différence des significations).</td>
<td>Une forme (toujours relative à une signification).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure vocale (servant de forme ou de plusieurs formes dans I).

Figure 1: Saussure’s five-sided concept of sign as edited by Engler (ELG 7: 42).

Vue habituelle :
A. Signification
B. Forme

Vue proposée :

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Différence générale des significations (n’exist que selon la différence des formes)</td>
<td>Une signification (toujours relative à une forme)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Différence générale des formes (n’existant que selon la différence des significations)</td>
<td>Une forme (toujours relative à &lt;une signification&gt; ).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure vocale (servant de forme ou de plusieurs formes dans I).

Figure 2: Saussure’s five-sided concept of sign as edited by Amacker (SL 77: 148–149).

formulation\(^{40}\) as paratactic relations (sign-to-sign and signification-to-signification) is here reformulated as “general difference between forms (signs)” and “general difference between significations.” Thus, the series of forms and significations that we were presented with, seem now to be summarized under the heading of difference. Furthermore, there are two sets of differences that are related to each other: the general difference of forms and the general difference of significations.

We can also see that Amacker’s rendering of the scheme (Figure 2) is much closer to what is to be found in the manuscript than Engler’s representation (Figure 1). In

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\(^{40}\) This formulation appears earlier than the quaternion scheme in the ELG, while Amacker places it a couple of paragraphs later. However, the exact order cannot be established with certainty.
the manuscript and in Amacker’s version, the lines that indicate the nature of the relations between the elements in the quaternion (column I) give the impression of an all-sided connection, each element being equally related to every other, while in Engler’s presentation column I looks rather similar to a group of two fractions with an indefinite relation to each other. It appears that Saussure had first drawn something like a coordinate system, organizing the position of each of the four irreducible terms, and then tried to cross out one of its sides – the line dividing *une forme* and *une signification* (this moment is indicated by Amacker in a critical note, SL 77: 149, n. 8). So, there is a relation between form and signification, signifier and signified – but in another sense, there is not. Whether there is such a relation or not is undecidable, and as it was pointed out earlier, “*la forme* est la même chose que la *signification*” – meaning that they inhabit the same topological space.

As for the *general differences* between forms and between significations, now we see that what appeared as limited series of significations or forms (abc, AHZ; *un certain nombre de…*) now seems to have been reformulated so that it could encompass the whole of the given significations or the given forms in a certain language – it is no less than a *general* difference. We might even say that it is equal to the principle of difference, the very fact that there are *different* forms or meanings in a linguistic system.

How should we read this strange quasi-coordinate system that regulates the all-sided reference of irreducible terms within the set of three irreducible relations? If the singular signifier and signified (*une forme*, *une signification*) are both aporetically identified and incapable of entering into a direct relation with each other, the link is constituted by the two sets of differences. Since the only direct relation of a singular form is that to the *series* of different significations, and the only possible
relation of the singular signification is the one to the *series* of forms, we shall define
the *mediating* element between them as *the whole of the system*. In a self-mediating
system, each single signifying element in the system (the language) is determined as
such by all other elements and by all existing relations between them. This indicates
a *recursive structure* of the system. A similar interpretation is proposed by Tomaso
Russo Cardona who prioritizes the notion *recursivité* on the basis of mathematical

To give an example of a self-mediating system, let us imagine a very simple
system of three elements: A, B and C. If the element A is determined by the elements B
and C, but, in its turn, takes part in the determination of both B and C (the same
scheme applying to both B and C), this would mean that A is already included in the
external elements that determine it, and thus – determines itself from the outside. It
is both internal and external to itself. This situation could be interpreted as recur-
sion.41 Moreover, when we say determined by, we actually mean being different from,
since the difference is the principle of mutual determination of elements in a
semiological system.42 The meaning of the notion of difference in Saussure’s usage
implies both the principle of relation and the complex of all relata. Difference is the
basis of all *unités linguistiques* (‘linguistic elements’) and its importance could be
inferred from many sections of the CLG. However, in *On the Dual Essence*, Saussure
not only emphatically insists on the role of difference in language systems but
describes it as: (1) fundamentally negative; (2) the element that enables signifiers and
signified to enter into a mutual relation:

> *Principe fondamental de la sémiologie, ou de la « langue » envisagée régulièrement comme langue et non pas comme résultat d’états précédents* Il n’y a dans la langue ni signes, ni significations, mais de DIFFÉRENCES de signes et des DIFFÉRENCES de signification; lesquelles 1° n’existent pas les unes absolument que par les autres (dans les deux sens) et sont donc inséparables et solidaire; mais 2° n’arrivent jamais à se correspondre directement. D’où l’on peut immédiatement conclure: que tout, et dans les deux domaines (non séparables d’ailleurs), est

41 Human capacity for recursion is highlighted as the key difference between human language and
animal systems of communication by Hauser et al. (2002). However, these scholars research language
with a view to its evolutionary origins, and focus on recursion in syntactic structures rather than in
semantics, as we are trying to do here.

42 In a personal conversation with Léopold Gautier, Saussure shared the idea that the differences
between forms and between significations in language could be compared to cutting a line in pieces:
> “Ensuite, oui, ce qui est essentiel, c’est le problème des unités. En effet, la langue est nécessairement comparable à une ligne dont les éléments sont coupés aux ciseaux, pan, pan, pan, et non pas découps chacun avec une forme. Ces éléments, quels sont-ils? etc. etc.” (SM 30) (‘Next, yes, what is essential, is the problem of units. In fact, language is necessarily comparable to a line the elements of which are cut off by scissors, snip, snip, snip, and not cut out each with a certain form. What are these elements? etc.’).
NÉGATIF dans la langue – repose sur une opposition compliquée, mais uniquement sur une opposition, sans intervention nécessaire d’aucune espèce de donnée positive. (ELG 22b: 70; SL 100: 181–182)

(‘Fundamental principle of semiology, or of “language” understood regularly as language and not as a result of previous states In language, there are neither signs, nor significations, but DIFFERENCES of signs and DIFFERENCES of signification; which, first, have no absolute existence except through each other (in both senses) and are therefore inseparable and solidary; but, second, they never come to correspond to each other directly. Hence, we could conclude: that everything, in both areas (not separable otherwise), is NEGATIVE in language – it rests on a complicated opposition, but only on an opposition, without any need for an intervention of a positive given.’

On the one hand, we have this insistence on negativity and the purely differential character of the elements at all linguistic levels, but on the other – the idea that in this differentiating process, sound and meaning actually start relating to each other. So, without this all-permeating negative differentiality, no semiological process, no meaning production would ever come into being:

Ainsi, non seulement il n’y aura pas de termes positifs, mais des différences ; mais deuxièmement, ces différences résultent d’une combinaison de la forme et du sens perçu. (ELG 20b: 66; SL 51: 10943)

(‘Thus, not only aren’t there going to be any positive terms, but only differences; but, second, these differences are the result of a combination of the form with the <perceived?> meaning.’

5 The material dimension of language

If all that matters in language as a system are negative differences, what is the role of the material aspect? One of the orthodox structuralist linguistic theses that have their origin in the CLG is the idea that both sides of the sign are of an ideal order – they are both of a psychological nature. A similar statement appears in ED:

[Les deux éléments du mot sont réciproquement dans l’ordre spirituel ; notre point de vue constant sera de dire que non seulement la signification, mais aussi le signe est un fait de conscience pur. (ELG 2a: 19; SL 53: 116)

(‘The two elements of the word are mutually within the mental order; our stable point of view would be to say that not only the signification but also the sign is a pure fact of consciousness.’)
This means that there is nothing material in language – even when speaking of its phonetics. The vocal aspect of language would then be only a mental representation of sounds, not the actual sounds we produce and perceive. It is important to stress here that this predicament concerns the phonological aspect of the sign as a sign. Yet, if we come back to the final quaternion and the four-sided diagram, we will notice that apart from the final quaternion (the actual semiological entity), there is a fifth element: column II, designated as “Figure vocale (servant de forme ou de plusieurs formes dans I)” (Vocal figure (serving as a form or as multiple forms to an entity in column I); see Figures 1–3).

What is the vocal figure? This is the level of sound regardless of its signifying function. This is the phonetic dimension outside the four-sided signifying constellation. The vocal figure pertains to the order of phonetics (or etymology). That is why Saussure prefers to define the vocal figure starting from the definition of form rather than proceeding in the opposite direction, defining the form on the basis of the vocal figure, because “il faut partir de la donnée semiologique” (we should be starting from the semiological fact’; ELG 6e: 37; SL 64: 132). So, although serving as a form, the vocal figure does not take part in the semiological dimension of language:

Une figure vocale devient une forme depuis l’instant crucial où on l’introduit dans le jeu de signes appelé langue, de la même façon qu’un morceau d’étoffe dormant à fond de cale devient un signal à l’instant où il est hissé 1er parmi d’autres signes hissés au même moment et concourant à une signification ; 2o entre cent autres qui auraient pu être hissés, et dont le souvenir ne concourt pas moins à [ ] (ELG 6e: 38; SL 65: 132)

(‘A vocal figure becomes a form at the crucial moment when it is introduced into the interplay of signs called language, just as a piece of fabric lying at the bottom of the ship’s hold becomes a signal at the moment it is hoisted 1. along with other signs hoisted at the same moment and conveying a signification; 2. from among a hundred others that could have been hoisted and the memory of which does not conform less to [ ]’)

Entering the semiological system, the purely material element starts playing the role of a signifying form. The problem that remains is the necessity of this new division – between form and vocal figure. If the form is of a psychological (or ideal) order (just as the signified notion) and the vocal figure is purely material, and if the one could be transformed into the other, this means that the purely material elements become in a sense im-materialized upon entering language.44 Moreover, this would mean that the signifying aspect of language is split into two – it could exist as pure matter, without

44 An alternative, but strikingly similar, solution is developed by Louis Hjelmslev through the distinction between sign (a signifying element) and figure (the material support of the signifying element; Hjelmslev 1968 [1943]: 63–70).
relation to semiosis, and it could exist as a part of language, but then – it is no longer material.

The aporetic mode of this element is reflected in a note that isn’t a part of the treatise On the Dual Essence of Language but was found in the same folder with it in 1996. In Engler’s edition, these notes are designated as “Nouveaux Item” and placed at the end of the edition, while Amacker inserts them as preliminary notes at the beginning as “Nouvelles notes Item.” This preliminary position makes the reading of the notes in the framework of ED more difficult and encourages a reverse procedure – to read the treatise itself in the light of the Item. In one of these notes, Saussure introduces the notion of kénôme (ELG p. 93, SL 5: 56–57) – from the Greek κένωμα, meaning ‘that which is empty,’ an empty shell. This is the vocal figure. It is the material receptacle that could be inhabited by the living being of a sign (and here by sign I mean the semiological relation of relations in the quaternion). The note on the kenome discloses clearly the difference between form and vocal figure:

On commet cette erreur de croire [qu’il y a] 1. un mot comme par exemple voir existent en soi, 2. une signification, qui est la chose associée à ce mot. Or [ ], c’est-à-dire que c’est l’association même qui fait le mot, et que hors d’elle il n’y a plus rien.

La meilleure preuve est que vwar dans une autre langue aurait un autre sens. Mais, cela vu, il est donc bien clair que vous n’avez plus le droit de diviser, et d’admettre d’un côté le mot, de l’autre sa signification. Cela fait tout un. Vous pouvez seulement constater le kénôme et le sème associatif (ELG p. 93, SL 5: 56–57)

(‘One tends to make the mistake of believing [that there is] 1. a word, like for example voir [to see], existing in itself; 2. a signification which is the thing associated with that word. Now [,] that is to say that it is the association itself that creates the word and that outside of it, there is nothing. The best proof is that in another language, vwar [the phonetic transcription of voir] would have another meaning. But once this has become obvious, it is now clear that you no longer have the right to divide and to allow, on the one hand, the word, and on the other – its signification. It would be all one. You can only affirm the kenome and the associative seme.)

However fleeting it may be, the notion of kenome demonstrates that the key semiological question of how signifier and signified are related to each other becomes now slightly, yet crucially, displaced: it is transformed into a question about how the mental entity of the semiological relation of relations (in this case, the associative seme) could become flesh, could be incarnated in a kenome. In fact, if we come back to the distinctive fragment defining the actual meaning of linguistic dualism, we

45 As we read in a fragment dedicated to vocal entities, “les entités de l’ordre vocal ne sont pas des entités linguistiques” (‘the entities of the vocal order are not linguistic entities”; ELG 5b: 33; SL 57: 121).
would notice that this is the very core of the language duality: “the duality of the vocal phenomenon AS SUCH and the vocal phenomenon AS A SIGN – of the physical (objective) fact and the physical-mental (subjective) fact, and in no way [in the duality] of the ‘physical’ fact of sound as opposed to the ‘mental’ fact of signification” (ELG 2d: 20–21; SL 37: 87).

As we indicated earlier, this passage contains Saussure’s most direct statement on linguistic dualism. Therefore, it is somewhat strange that it hasn’t attracted enough attention from scholars. The most profound analysis of this fragment belongs to Kazuhiro Matsuzawa who notices a peculiar inner contradiction in it, pointing out the actual perspectives that the fragment opens up onto the interpretation of Saussure’s ideas:

[O]n peut admettre un nouveau dualisme que Saussure formule ici contre le dualisme courant. Ce passage est particulièrement important, car on est souvent tenté de lier fort rapidement la dualité du langage à la bi-facialité du signe linguistique … La dualité est dans ce cas justement entre la figure vocale et le signe linguistique dans sa totalité … La formulation de Saussure reste équivoque … Ce flottement résulte du fait que la dualité de la figure vocale et du signe linguistique se répète en abyme dans le signe linguistique lui-même, comme une autre dualité, celle du signifiant et du signifié. Si Saussure accorde une attention toute particulière, non sans équivoque, à une telle dualité, c’est parce qu’il est impossible de concevoir le langage séparé complètement de la matérialité physique de la figure vocale. (Matsuzawa 2016: 110–111)

(‘[W]e can assume a new dualism that Saussure formulates here against the traditional one. This passage is particularly important because we are often tempted to connect too quickly the duality of language to the two-faced nature of the linguistic sign … In this case, the duality is precisely between the vocal figure and the linguistic sign in its totality … Saussure’s formulation remains equivocal … This uncertainty results from the fact that the duality of the vocal figure and the linguistic sign repeats itself to infinity within the linguistic sign itself as another duality, that of the signifier and the signified. If Saussure pays particular attention, not unequivocally, to such a duality, it is because it is impossible to consider language as completely separate from the physical materiality of the vocal figure.’)

This observation is crucial to understanding both the nature of the signifying relation according to Saussure, and the acknowledgement of the function of materiality in language. What is then the meaning of this duality of language? At first it seems to be the duality of signifier and signified, or mental and physical aspects of language – in fact, this conception is trivial and was already widespread among linguists and philosophers of language before Saussure. Here we see something else: Saussure rejects this traditional position (it is all the more inexplicable that he has gone down in history as its chief proponent) and replaces it by a more subtle analysis of the semiological relations in language.

The actual opposition in language is, thus, not the one between physical and mental, between le son et le sens (‘sound and meaning,’ as Roman Jakobson would put
it a few decades later), but between physical and physical-mental, between two functions, two roles of the vocal phenomenon. Once, taken in its pure form, and a second time, taken as a semiological fact, in the role of what would be designated in the Third course as signifier. We see that this second, subjective, side is not only “mental” – it is “physical-mental.” This would mean that materiality is already included within the signifying relation, and appears there, as Matsuzawa puts it, en abyme. The quaternion is already of this hybrid, physical-mental nature.

The importance of the material dimension is explicitly visible in another series of notes that have been published by Rudolf Engler in volume IV of the critical edition of the CLG – these are the Item notes (E 3306–3324). Without going into detail about the significance of this set of notes in the Saussurean corpus (see Gandon 1995; Jäger 2010: 134–163), we will only mention that here, Saussure explores another terminological framework (again an experiment in the search of a better substitute for the ill-suited sound-concept opposition). It consists of the terms sême and sôme understood respectively as the inner semiological relation (the element that we encountered as “associative seme”) and its outer shell, its ‘body’ (the kenome). This sôme is defined as cadavre – in this case a ‘material body’ rather than a ‘dead body,’ and envelope – the ‘envelope’ or ‘wrapping’ of the semic element. One note in this series puts a special emphasis on the material element in the sign constellation:

<En me promenant>, je fais <sans rien dire> une encoche sur un arbre, comme par plaisir. La personne qui m’accompagne garde l’idée de cette encoche, et il est incontestable qu’elle associe deux ou trois idées à cette encoche dès ce moment, alors que je n’avais pas moi-même d’autre idée que de la mystifier ou de m’amuser. – Toute chose matérielle est déjà pour nous signe: c’est-à-dire impression que nous associons à d’autres, <mais la chose matérielle paraît indispensable>. La seule particularité du signe linguistique est du produire une association plus précise que toute autre, et peut-être verra-t-on que c’est là la forme la plus parfaite d’associations d’idées, ne pouvant être réalisé que sur un sôme conventionnel. (E 3320.4, t. IV: 40)

(<While taking a stroll> I am making, <without saying anything,> a mark on a tree, just for fun. The person who is accompanying me notices the idea of this mark, and it is incontestable that from this moment on she associates two or three ideas with this mark although I have simply had the intention to joke with her or to amuse myself. – Every material thing is for us already a sign: that is, an impression that we associate with other impressions, <but the material element seems indispensable>. The only characteristic trait of the linguistic sign is that it produces an association more precise than any other, and maybe one day we will notice that it is here that the most perfect association is to be found, unable to be brought about otherwise than in a conventional sôme [body].’)

Statements like “Every material thing is for us already a sign” and “the material element seems indispensable” reveal the problematic and contradictory status of Saussure’s idea that “not only the signification but also the sign is a pure fact of consciousness.” It seems now that only the form within the quaternion could be
perceived as “a pure fact of consciousness,” but the form in the role of a vocal figure still must be material. Nevertheless, they might be perceived as one and the same thing (just analyzed in different aspects). The exclusively fragmentary nature of Saussure’s manuscript legacy and the lack of almost any authorized publications prevents scholarship from extracting a stable, contradiction-free “doctrine,” and thus precludes any possible “Saussurean orthodoxy” like the one Bally and Sechehaye tried to establish. That is why it is more productive to understand the framework of a question posed by Saussure than to strive for an unequivocal answer. Therefore, we shall conclude the argument by stating that it *is in the relation of the semiological unity to materiality, to the kenome of pure sound, that Saussure finds the neuralgic point of semiological reasoning.* This is what he designates as duality. Paradoxically, and despite the insistence on the “mental character” of both signifier and signified, materiality emerges on both sides of the linguistic difference: it is a kind of “dead matter” as a piece of fabric *sleeping* *(dormant)* at the bottom of the ship’s hold, and a second time, as an animated, hoisted flag, it is already included in the four-sided relation of the semiological system, not on the level of the single form, but on the level of negative differences that recursively construct the system. In fact, Saussure doesn’t employ here the metaphors of living and dead; he would rather insist on the exchange of values according to the model of economic circulation where material entities acquire value not because of their singular inner nature, but insofar as they are involved in the system of exchange of values. Thus, the central contribution of Saussure’s revision of traditional linguistics concerns the re-tracing of this most important interior border of language as a signifying system, the one that separates the physical from the mental.

**Abbreviations**

B François Bouchardy’s notes  
C Émile Constantin’s notes  
CLG *Cours de linguistique générale.* 1916, éd. Bally et Sechehaye  
D Georges Dégallier’s notes  
E *Cours de linguistique générale.* 1989 [1968], éd. critique Engler  
ED *De l’essence double de langage*  
G Léopold Gautier’s notes  
R Albert Riedlinger’s notes  
S Mme A. Sechehaye’s notes  
SM *Les sources manuscrites du Cours de linguistique générale de F. de Saussure.* 1957, éd. Godel
Research funding: This research has been funded by the Centre of Advanced Study Sofia (CAS), Bulgaria, through the Independent Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowships for Bulgarian Junior Scholars and Bulgarian Academic Diaspora funding programme for the academic year 2022/2023.

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