

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 33 (2016)

Artikel: Value of and in learning foreign languages
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-632495>

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Value of and in Learning Foreign Languages¹

Claire-A. Forel

We are going to play on the meanings of the word *value* to discuss why there is value learning foreign languages, which is not very difficult to grasp, but also why understanding the fact that languages are systems of “values,” a central Saussurean concept, can help overcoming some obstacles in learning foreign languages. We first shall look at two reasons why learning foreign languages is beneficial; we’ll then examine the innovative concept of plurilingualism and show how this new competence broadens the perspectives of the language learner. We will then move to the concept of value as it is presented in Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (first published a hundred years ago) as well as in the students’ notes the book is based on.² Finally we will see how it is used in raising learners’ awareness of how languages work and therefore why it helps acquiring new languages.

1. Value of learning foreign languages

1.1. Linguistic diversity as enrichment

The Council of Europe was founded in 1947 and its principal aim, as stated in the first article of its Statute, “is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realizing the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating

¹ Special thanks to Eva Waltermann for her careful reading of this article and her precious advice.

² Saussure never wrote the book, his junior colleagues Ch. Bally et A. Sechehaye used the notes taken by the students who sat in the three courses given on the subject, and turned them into a book.

their economic and social progress.” Of course one of the most salient aspects of this common heritage is the extraordinary variety of its languages. However, this diversity could also be seen as an obstacle which must then be overcome by education and notably linguistic education, as the Council of Europe goes on by saying: “the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert that *diversity* from a barrier to communication into a source of *mutual enrichment* and understanding” (Recommendation R (82) 18 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, emphasis mine).

The *diversity* mentioned by the Council of Europe however contributes to more than just unity. It is seen by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as the first step towards an *awareness* of what language is. “It is contact with foreign speakers which alerts people’s minds to the existence of languages as such.”³ However this perception is to be placed in a larger context:

Let us note that primitive peoples are disposed to recognize this diversity as a fact, and their conception is not without interest: for one thing, it is what distinguishes them most sharply from others, from their neighbours. This feature of their language, which they cannot help but notice, becomes one of the features they recognize as differentiating them from neighbouring people. And how do they conceive of this? As a different custom, comparable to different customs in clothing, hair styles, weaponry: and this is quite right. (Saussure, *Troisième cours* 11a-12a)

The starting point from which to understand what the concept of language is appears then to be the same both for the layman and for the linguist:

As far as linguistics is concerned, the diversity of languages is indeed the fundamental act. There was no linguistics until attention focused on this diversity, which gradually led to comparison and step by step towards the general idea of linguistics. (Saussure, *Troisième cours* 11a-12a)

Hence the *linguistic education* that will help overcome the obstacle presented by the great diversity of languages in Europe can be understood not only as *learning foreign languages* but also, while doing so, *learning about what language is*. Offering language learners some insights into the nature

³ However, translating Saussure’s original *la langue* by “languages” as Harris does in this edition of Constantin’s notebooks is rather unfortunate, because what Saussure meant was the abstraction, the linguistic phenomenon, rather than the multiplicity of languages.

in this specific tool of communication is what the language awareness approach is about and we will discuss it presently. But before, rather than concentrating only on the philosophical or educational value of language learning, one may also wish to consider its economic benefits.

1.2 The economic value of foreign language learning

The language economist F. Grin explains that the value of learning languages can be seen from four different perspectives:

The benefits [of language learning] may be *market related*, such as higher earnings, access to more desirable jobs, etc.; other benefits are of the *non-market* kind, such as direct access, thanks to language competence, to other cultures and people carrying them. [. . .] whether of the market or of the non-market kind, the benefits and costs of education, [. . .] may be evaluated at the *private* or *social* level. The private level reflects the conditions confronting the typical or average person, whereas the social level concerns benefits and cost for society as a whole. (Grin 85-86)

A striking example of market value can be found in a study produced a number of years ago but which is both iconic and representative of how knowing languages can impact earnings. Comparing the relative “market value” of language knowledge in Switzerland, Grin showed that knowing French meant a potential increase in salary of 14.07 percent for Swiss German speakers, whereas being able to speak German meant 13.82 percent more wages for French speaking Swiss, thereby pointing at the very concrete “value” of language learning.

Among the aims and objectives of Council of Europe language policy as they are presented in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (referred to as *CEFR* below) we do find these various market and non-market values although they are not necessarily as neatly separated. For example, “to equip all Europeans for the challenges of intensified international mobility and closer cooperation not only in education, culture and science but also in trade and industry” can be read as yielding both non-market and market, as well as social and individual values. “To promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication” implies that great care is taken “to avert the dangers that might result from the marginalization of those lacking the skills necessary to communicate in an interactive Europe.” Individuals who would not feel themselves to be members of a multilingual community

become a social threat as “xenophobia and ultra-nationalist backlashes [constitute] a primary obstacle to European mobility and integration, and [. . .] a major threat to European stability and to the healthy functioning of democracy” (*CEFR* 3-4). Foreign language learning is thus seen as not only the means to get a good job, but also as an element of citizens’ identity insofar as it allows them to feel they belong to a larger community than their own country, Europe, whose cultural wealth they are encouraged to enjoy.

It is therefore clear that the value and benefits of language learning are manifold. Although one could argue that these benefits have been recognized ever since languages have been taught, a European approach to the matter is fairly recent.

2. Value of plurilingualism

2.1 *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*

In the period from 1989 to 1996, the Council of Europe put forward a project called “Language Learning for European Citizenship” and one of its key elements was the development of an instrument which would be a common framework of reference for all member states for the learning, teaching and assessment of foreign language learning. It is known today as *CEFR*. It describes “all the major aspects of language use and competence” (*CEFR* 43) and is an extraordinary overview on what knowing a language implies. It brought forward the concept of plurilingualism:

Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society. Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular school or educational system, or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language, or reducing the dominant position of English in international communication. (*CEFR* 4)

In fact, the authors of the *CEFR* postulated a language competence that did not add up the various languages learnt but rather used previous experience in learning one language for the acquisition of another and so worth building up a plurilingual competence:

The fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or col-

lege, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. (CEFR 4)

In a way one could say that this competence aims at turning language learners into lay linguists, which seems very much in accordance with the programme Saussure sets for professional linguists at the beginning of his third course!⁴

2.2 Understanding what languages are

To go into more detail, the *CEFR* describes a wealth of partial *language use* competences, such as those involved in sustaining a spoken monologue, or writing reports and essays, monitoring one's speech or listening to the radio, not to forget taking part in an informal conversation, etc. The learner should also grow specific *learner* competences among which a "language and communication awareness":

Sensitivity to language and language use, *involving knowledge and understanding of the principles according to which languages are organised and used*, enables new experience to be assimilated into an ordered framework and welcomed as an enrichment. The associated new language may then be more readily learnt and used, rather than resisted as a threat to the learner's already established linguistic system, which is often believed to be normal and "natural."
(CEFR 107, emphasis mine)

The question then is: how does one help learners develop this knowledge about languages?

⁴ cf. "Languages constitute the concrete object that the linguist encounters on the earth's surface; 'the language' is the heading one can provide for whatever <generalizations> the linguist may be able to extract from all his observations across time and space." (Saussure, *Troisième cours* 11a). *The language* would be interpreted here as the counterpart of plurilingual competence.

2.3 Language awareness

We are now going to turn to language teaching/learning as such and we will discuss the contribution that Saussure's construct of "value" can make to that field. But first we need to look at a concept that is nowadays less fashionable but still as vital both in terms of acquiring new languages but also in understanding language at large. Eric Hawkins who promoted *language awareness* sums up the issue as "the foreign language as education, not simply instruction in a skill" (Hawkins 1999: 134). The aims of this approach foreshadow what will later be found in the *CEFR*:

Language awareness was put forward, primarily by modern linguists, as a new "bridging" element in the UK school curriculum. It was viewed as a solution to several of the failures in UK schools: illiteracy in English, failure to learn foreign languages, and divisive prejudice. (Hawkins 124).

In order to promote linguistic tolerance and also skills in dealing with different languages, a team of researchers in the French speaking part of Switzerland led by Christiane Perregaux produced material for young children, very nicely nicknamed *EOLE* (*Aeolus*) which stands for *Eveil au Langage et Ouverture aux Langues*. Besides acknowledging and welcoming pupils' mother tongues it also aims at developing awareness of plurilingualism in close or distant environments and, at a more strictly linguistic level, structuring pupils' linguistic knowledge, increasing pupils' curiosity towards the functioning of other languages (but not forgetting their own!) as well as developing knowledge about languages.

Now activities like those that can found in *EOLE* certainly contribute to developing *knowledge and understanding* languages at large. However, in order to implement them in a satisfactory way teachers themselves should have a better understanding of what languages are before they start teaching any language, mother tongue or foreign languages. This is exactly what Eddy Roulet who inspired language awareness movements demanded:

In order to guide learners in their discovery of what the system of a language is as well as what its use implies, it is not enough to have a good practical command of the language, nor a normative knowledge of its grammar rules, nor of the pedagogical understanding of how to impart these. One needs first to be fully aware of how it functions as a system – this is especially true for the spoken language – and to master the instruments which permit one to grasp this system. (119, my translation)

Let us then look at an instrument designed for children to understand some aspects of what a language is.

3. "Value" in plurilingual education

Besides arguing for the value of plurilinguistic language teaching, *EOLE* also raises another point as it deals with the Saussurean notion of *value* itself. Indeed, one of the first activities offered is about "the fact that languages are social constructs and the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign" (Perregaux 115, my translation) through the examination of onomatopoeia corresponding to animal cries. Children are confronted to the various ways the same animal cries are interpreted in different languages. Hence whereas the barking of a dog would be *Woof! Woof!* in English, *Ão! Ão!* in Portuguese and *Ouah! Ouah!* in French, the little resemblance between these disappears in Chinese *Wāng! Wāng!* (when the rooster's cry is *Wōwōwō!*) and even more so in Albanian *Hum! Hum!* "Can a dog bark 'in Portuguese' and a frog croak 'in Chinese'? That's strange!" is the title of a bingo game in which children have to recognize an animal through its cry as expressed in various languages.

A second activity is still about the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign but this time it deals with a morphological fact. The objective is to: "identify the gender of a noun by looking at its determiner; become aware of the arbitrariness of grammatical gender; notice construction similarities in simple noun phrases (determiner + noun) in various romance languages" (Perregaux 219, my translation). After observing that French, Portuguese Italian and Spanish all use the feminine gender for walnuts (*la noix, a noz, la noce, la nuez*) or for pears as well as for cherries, but use the masculine gender for lemons and radishes, pupils are presented the case of tomatoes whose gender varies according to the different languages, French being the only one to use the feminine *la tomate* where the other romance languages use the masculine: *o tomate, il pomodoro* and *el tomate*.

In the second volume of Perregaux et al we find yet another activity for slightly older children whose objectives are also about gender. However, this time gender is presented as a possible means of classifying nouns and is seen as both arbitrary and "cultural." Children are presented with a list of nouns in Swahili which they have to classify according to their suffixes. The criteria that define the various groups must seem very intriguing since they are for the first "*things*" and *nonliving entities*, the second, *human beings*, the third *parts of the body*, while the fourth is

abstract nouns without a plural. Children are meant to “put their own systems of classification [of nouns] into perspective and imagine that there can be others” (Perregaux, Vol 2 206, my translation).

As we can see from these various activities, the *EOLE* project keeps its promises since Portuguese, Spanish or even Swahili are very likely to be some children’s mother tongues that are thus highlighted; their classmates’ curiosity for these languages they don’t know will be aroused; linguistically speaking, the games makes pupils reflect about the different ways languages are organized which as in the case of the Swahili classification of nouns can be very different from the language used at school; these activities also sharpen their sense of observation and hence develop their skills as linguists in the making. However there is unfortunately an important flaw in the use that is made of the notion of *arbitrariness*.

4. “Value” in linguistics

4.1 Arbitrariness and conventionality

Arbitrary is often seen as synonymous with *conventional* implying that there is no necessary link between the sequence of sounds used and what it indicates. The problem, as we shall see very shortly, lies with what we take *meaning* to be. If we decide that the *meaning* is the thing itself then language is seen as a kind of nomenclature, a list of labels for things. This is what the authors of *EOLE* seem to think when they explain in the teacher’s book that *arbitrariness* is the “absence of ‘physical’ link between the signifier and the signified, between the object and the name that designates it”. Saussure, who deems arbitrariness as “the organizing principle for the whole of linguistics” (*Cours de linguistique générale* 68), explains that not only is there no internal causality between the sign facets of the linguistic signs, signifier and signified, or to put it another way: the mental image of a sequence of sounds and the concept it refers to, but also reminds us that signs are “psychological entities” i.e. exist only in the minds of the speakers of a given language.

Onomatopoeias seem to challenge this definition. “Onomatopoeias are half way through the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and an interpretation which is close to extra linguistic reality” (Perregaux 123, my translation) say the authors of *EOLE*, which seems to agree – even partly – with Saussure who explains that “onomatopoeic words might be held to show that a choice of signal is not always arbitrary” (*Cours de linguistique générale* 102). The variety of the representations of barking

shows that phono-symbolism can be very diverse. Once these attempts have entered a language they become part of that language, they will for example conform to its sound system and, more importantly one may add, they will become linguistic signs, hence mental entities. In German, donkeys go *i-a*, in French we have almost the same sequence except that the second vowel is nasalized *hi han* [i ã]. Chinese on the other hand uses two of its five tones: neutral and falling in *yāng* and we may add that this version seems to really mimic the melody of braying! Finally, Saussure also reminds us that once in the language, onomatopoeias are submitted to the law of arbitrariness and can be altered: the word *pigeon* was once an onomatopoeic *pipio* supposed to reflect cooing! (*Cours de linguistique générale* 102).

Our next example will help us see more clearly the difference between *conventionality* and *arbitrariness*. *EOLE* explains very rightly that loan words are “words or expressions that [. . .] a community borrows from another language, which are not translated but generally adapted to the morphosyntactic or phonetic or prosodic rules of its own language” (Perregaux 255). It gives as an example the French word *la tomate*, a loan word from Spanish *el tomate*, which itself borrowed it from Aztec *tomatl*. However, giving as a didactic objective for children to “understand the arbitrary character of gender (by noticing that the gender of a *same noun* changes from one language to the next)” (Perregaux 222, my translation) contradicts what has just been said about borrowings. Once *el tomate* entered French as *la tomate*, it no longer was *the same word* because it fitted into another system with its own morphology, syntax, phonology and also lexicon. With either *el tomate* or *la tomate* one can refer to *the same object* but to speak of *a same word* would be tantamount to saying that languages are nomenclatures. What one can learn about languages with such an example is that they each have their own ways of speaking about the world.

4.2 Linguistic value

One of Saussure’s great contributions to linguistics is precisely having stated that languages are systems of pure *values*. This means that the value of any of its members depends on the value of the other member of this same system. Saussure adds that values are “relative.” Let us take an example:

The French word *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*; but it does not have the same value. There are various reasons for this but in particular the fact that the English word for the meat of this animal, as prepared and served for a meal, is not *sheep* but *mutton*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mutton* hinges on the fact that in English there is also another word *mutton* for the meat, whereas *mouton* in French covers them both” (*Cours de linguistique générale* 114).

This brings us back to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Nothing is given in advance nor is determined by some kind of relation to the world. In other words, values are determined by the system they are members of. This is yet another reason why *la tomate* and *el tomate* cannot be the *same word*: since they belong to two different systems, they necessarily have different values.

This brings us to our third example, the classification of nouns in Swahili. We can clearly see that the semantic features used to classify words in that language are very different from what we know in French or in English: “things and nonliving entities”; “human beings”; “parts of the body” and finally “abstract nouns” (without a plural) have little to do with, for example, the classification of nouns according to gender in French or into countable or uncountable in English. The objectives for this activity namely: “developing a better understanding of the idea of noun classification, by observing a language (Swahili) where they are classified very differently” as well as “putting one’s own system of classification into perspective and imagining that there can be others” (Perregaux, Vol 2 207, my translation) clearly point towards languages being systems of values. Playing on words one could say that this realization also shows the value that can be found in knowing or knowing about foreign languages.

5. Conclusion

Of course Saussure’s contribution to understanding what languages are goes far beyond what we discussed here. One should not stop at Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* but it is a sound basis for any further developments: de Saussure’s general linguistics and more specifically the concept of *value* in language can greatly contribute to help language learners and their teachers grasp what they need to understand, what languages are and how they function. Saussure’s idea of languages being organized around systems of value, an idea incidentally based on economy, is a notion that can both help learners in a plurilinguistic approach

in their insights on the linguistic phenomenon and also place language in the larger frame of economic systems.

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