

Waving goodbye to Ferdinand: natural language is not composed of Saussurean signs

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This talk aims to show that the atoms of linguistic composition are not Saussurean signs (*viz.* arbitrary pairings of form & meaning; Saussure 1916, Hjelmslev 1943).

Setting aside ideophones and cases of onomatopoeia, most modern approaches to linguistic theory take it as a given that the atoms of morphosyntactic composition – be they ‘words’ or morphemes – are form-meaning pairings (which can and often are associated with additional, *sui generis* syntactic features). I will argue that this is in fact an error: architecturally speaking, structured natural-language expressions are entirely devoid of Saussurean signs (with the possible exception of monomorphemic utterances like “wow!”, “ugh”, and the like.)

I will argue in favor of a grammatical architecture where atoms of linguistic composition are entirely abstract, and are not directly associated with form *or* with meaning. Instead, these atoms, once syntactically arranged, constitute the input to a set of mapping rules to form, and to a separate set of mapping rules to meaning. These mapping rules are many-to-one rules and, importantly, nothing forces the set of atoms that map onto a particular element of form to also map, as a set, onto a particular element (or elements) of meaning.

In fact, the input sets to form and to meaning can stand in all manner of misalignment, including what I term *proper partial overlap*, an example of which is given in (1):

(1) abstract demonstration of *proper partial overlap*:

a. SYNTAX: [x, [y, z]]

b. SEMANTICS:

(i) {x} → A

(ii) {y, z} → B (descriptively, we are used to calling B an “idiom”)

c. MORPHO-PHONOLOGY:

(i) {x, y} → R (descriptively, we are used to calling R a “suppletive fusional exponent”)

(ii) {z} → S

The expression in (1) is composed of smaller parts, both in terms of its semantics (A, B), and in terms of its morpho-phonology (R, S). It would therefore be incorrect to claim that (1), as a whole, constitutes an ‘arbitrary’ pairing of form & meaning. At the same time, there is nothing else in (1) that constitutes a pairing of form & meaning, either – only pairings of abstract syntactic nodes with meaning (1.b.i-ii), and separate, incommensurate pairings of abstract syntactic nodes with form (1.c.i-ii). Thus, (1) involves no Saussurean signs whatsoever.

I will show that empirically, cases of *proper partial overlap* abound, as do other types of cases predicted by the proposed architecture. Lastly, I will argue that even those contemporary linguistic frameworks that distance themselves from outright Saussureanism, such as *Distributed Morphology* (Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994) and *Nanosyntax* (Starke 2009, Caha 2009, 2019), retain certain Saussurean vestiges that render them less explanatory than the current proposal.