Ferdinand, we hardly knew you

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1. The linguist chuckles at a joke

The π of Euclid and the G of Newton, formerly thought to be constant and universal, are now perceived in their ineluctable historicity; and the putative observer becomes fatally de-centered, disconnected from any epistemic link to a space-time point that can no longer be defined by geometry alone.

Alan Sokal, “Transgressing the Boundaries...”

In 1996, the physicist Alan Sokal pulled off a celebrated hoax when he published an article in the “Science Wars” special issue of the cultural studies journal Social Text. As he explained in Lingua Franca at about the same time, his article was a spoof, a parody of postmodernist rhetoric. By getting the article past the editors, he apparently showed that there was indeed little difference between real postmodern writing on science and a joke. In a particularly provocative gesture, Sokal subsequently expanded on his views in French (Sokal and Bricmont 1997), carrying the battle into the homeland of the opposition. Sokal’s work has provoked considerable controversy and indignant replies, in a debate that continues in diverse journals and on the internet.

Like some other linguists I know, I enjoyed Sokal’s joke from the sidelines, so to speak. After all, the positions he was attacking have nothing to do with me. Indeed, the entire landscape of what goes by the names postmodernism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, or just “theory”, appears to have little relevance to linguistics.

Much of this literature stresses the broader ideological and political implications of scientific theories, not in itself an unreasonable thing to do.1 At the same time, however, postmodern political and ideological positions come packaged together with views on science that are quite incompatible with basic assumptions of the research program of generative grammar, not to say all of modern science. The notion that scientific theories are simply one form of “discourse” that ought not be privileged over other types of discourse can and often does cross the line into an attack on rationality itself, and appears to deny the possibility of empirical science. Moreover, the emphasis on “social construction” is taken as being inimical to the idea that humans have innate cognitive properties, or any nontrivial genetic endowment. To generative linguists, the distinction between empirical and nonempirical issues remains quite relevant, and the extent to which human cognition is innate and controlled by genes is an empirical issue.

2. The linguist encounters some familiar terms

[Derrida] might just as well have been considered the person who pushed the structuralist logic to its limits and toward an even more radical interrogation of all substantification or founding essence, in the sense of eliminating the signified.


As alien as the views of postmodernism appear to us, though, we cannot help but recognize certain familiar names and terms. Postmodern “discourse” owes much to the work of French thinkers
such as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Kristeva. These writers, in turn, invoke the names of Saussure and Jakobson, well-known to all linguists. The familiar term is “structuralism”, which the writers named above claim to be working in/extend/contest/undermine/negate.²

Most linguists think they have a reasonable understanding of structuralism, and it is not so hard to understand. With a small “s”, structuralism is an approach to language, or to any other institution or behaviour, that views it as a system whose parts are interconnected, to a greater or lesser degree. This orientation is in contrast to “atomistic” approaches that focus on individual components without viewing them as part of a system. This is the lowest common denominator of all structuralist theories. Particular versions of structuralism, such as Prague School or American Structuralism, are more articulated and differ in important respects. Generative grammar is a species of structuralism because of its emphasis on grammar as a synchronic system, though it differs sharply from earlier versions in some fundamental ways.

The above understanding of structuralism can be found in almost any linguistics text. Outside of linguistics, however, there appears to be a very different understanding of what structuralism is all about.

3. **Le champ du signe, le chant du cygne³**

[Saussure’s] project of constructing a general semiology integrating all those disciplines concerned with the life of the signs at the core of social life was very ambitious...by its impetus, linguistics became the pilot science at the heart of the structuralist project...it was the melting pot of all the human sciences.


In François Dosse’s two-volume *Histoire du structuralisme* (1991), recently translated into English by Deborah Glassman (1999), structuralism is very much a French affair. The first surprise, to a linguist, is that the history begins with Jean-Paul Sartre. Why Sartre? In Dosse’s account, a diverse group of intellectuals who were opposed to Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, or who could not get regular jobs at the Sorbonne, rallied under the sign of structuralism, under which they were eventually to triumph.⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss took up structuralism under the influence of Roman Jakobson, and applied the linguistic model to anthropology, notably to kinship systems.

Though linguistics served as the model for structuralism, and was, according to Dosse, “the pilot science”, the structuralist excitement in France did not come from linguistics, but from other fields. Renewed interest in Saussure (and, for that matter, a new Saussure, as we will soon see) was created by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who brought Saussure and Lévi-Strauss together with the phenomenology of Husserl and the philosophy of presence. Soon Roland Barthes was applying his version of structuralism to literature and alienation, Jacques Lacan added Freud and psychoanalysis, Louis Althusser brought in Marxist theory, Michel Foucault contributed Nietzsche and the history of ideas, and Jacques Derrida innovated his own kind of textual anti-theory. And still the gates of the Sorbonne remained closed.

4. **A movement without a pilot**

*Pilot: transf. and fig. One who or that which serves as a guide through some unknown place or through a dangerous or difficult course of affairs; a guide; a leader in the hunting-field.*

*Oxford English Dictionary.*

Applied to language, structuralist ideas are fairly concrete. Languages, after all, *do* have structures. A syntactic structure is a concrete object, we can draw an exact picture of it. The system
of sound is independent of the system of meaning, and the relation between sound and meaning in words is arbitrary.

Once detached from the linguistic materials they were originally applied to, however, structuralist concepts very easily become metaphorical and free-floating, and are liable to be transformed in unexpected ways. This is why much writing on “structuralism” is baffling to a linguist: not just an analytic approach, in France structuralism became philosophy, metaphysics.

5. The rewriting of Saussure

[T]he real Saussure has wholly disappeared behind an idealist philosopher of language retrospectively constructed for their own purposes by the Tel Quel group and Jacques Derrida...And whenever I read Derrida’s book, Of Grammatology, I hear the ghost of Saussure howling ‘Liar!’


To fully comprehend how structuralism in France evolved I recommend the lucid account by Leonard Jackson (1991), The Poverty of Structuralism. Jackson writes from a perspective that is congenial to a generative linguist. His thesis is that the “Saussure” discussed in the works of the French writers mentioned above and in those influenced by them is not the real Saussure familiar to us. According to Jackson, outside of linguistics departments many students are unaware that Saussure was a linguist. They skip the linguistic examples, if they read him at all, and hence interpret his various categories as philosophical principles, not as analytic choices.

Cut loose from his original subject matter, Saussure’s concepts were radically reinterpreted. Language is form not substance? That means that texts have no fixed meaning. Synchrony is separate from diachrony? Then the speaking subject has no history. Reference is not part of langue? Therefore the world is constituted by language. Having thoroughly misconstrued Saussure, theorists began to attack the views they attributed to him. Thus, Derrida revealed the contradiction in Saussure’s supposed “phonocentrism”—the notion that the spoken language (phonology) takes precedence over writing—by pointing out that Saussure used letters to represent phonemes. Touché!

6. Our fellow’s keepers?

As wardens of repression and rationalizers of the social contract in its most solid substratum (discourse), linguists carry the Stoic tradition to its conclusion...It follows that formulating the problem of linguistic ethics means, above all, compelling linguistics to change its object of study.

Julia Kristeva, “The Ethics of Linguistics.”

In an article entitled “The Ethics of Linguistics”, Julia Kristeva delivers a strongly-worded critique of the ethics of generative grammar. Though none of it makes any sense to me (at the level of the signified, if such exists), we can always strive to attain higher ethical standards. Could we or anyone, for example, have done anything to avert the chain of misconceptions that led to Sokal’s hoax? Perhaps the Sorbonne could have opened up a few more positions before May 1968. And we linguists, perhaps we could do more to explain to a wider public what our theories are really about. We did not ask to be pilots; but having been put in that position, we should try to live up to the responsibilities it carries. So the next time you send off a manuscript you think nobody will ever read, remember the slogan made famous in 1968—the whole world is watching!
Notes

1. See, for example, Bracken (1973), Chomsky (1973), and Newmeyer (1986).
2. It is far from obvious which of these terms applies to any given text.
3. These are the subtitles of volumes 1 and 2, respectively, of Dosse (1991).
4. The puns and allusions in this sentence are the author’s own, though perhaps inspired by Dosse (when in Rome...).
5. Phonology actually is the queen of the sciences, though.
6. The encounter between Kristeva and Chomsky was not entirely successful:

   Kristeva on Chomsky, Dosse (1997, 2, 13): “I was quite disappointed by our conversations because of his disdain for everything involving stylistics and poetics. So far as he was concerned, these phenomena were little more than decorations.”

   Chomsky on Kristeva, Barsky (1997, 195): “Kristeva I met once. She came to my office to see me about 20 years ago, then some kind of raving Maoist, as I recall. I was never tempted to read further.”

References