

Saussure, by John Joseph

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“Any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats,” wrote George Orwell, and each serious study of a great scientist’s life is bound to leave us shaking our heads and reflecting on how utterly true Orwell’s comment is. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was among the greatest of the 19th century linguists, and from where we stand today, no doubt the one who ended up with the greatest name recognition. Linguists today remember him as a *Wunderkind*, one who published a revolutionary essay on Indo-European at the age of 21, and finished his doctoral thesis on Sanskrit just a year later. A brilliant, driven scholar from a bourgeois family in Geneva, his later fame came from the book he never wrote, the great work on general linguistics published under his name but in fact built up from the edited notes taken down by his last students: *Course on General Linguistics*.

We know him today in connection with the rise of *structuralism*, the method that has profoundly influenced the social sciences with the understanding that the way things appear is only of significance when they mark differences. Two opposing teams in a football game wear different colors, and this shows which team each player is on; it does not matter, structurally speaking, which color is chosen by which team, and all that matters is that the colors are different. In the case of language, this means searching for elegant patterns and symmetries (for patterns and symmetries are complex overlays of differences and identities) that motivate and explain how individual languages function and how they evolve.

John Joseph’s new biography of Saussure sheds brilliant light on the life of a scholar who was a man of his age, and who blazed trails to new vistas of social science in the century that followed his death. It is a rich account, sensitive to genealogy (in a day when genealogy really made a difference), to political and intellectual history, and framed with both sympathy and respect for a complex individual.

What drives the story is this: there are really *two* versions of Saussure's life that vying for the upper hand. The first is the one that the reader might come to this book with. Saussure was a promising linguist who studied Indo-European with the great scholars in Leipzig, and at the age of 21 published one of the most brilliant essays on Proto-Indo-European vowels that has ever been written. The next year, he finished a doctoral dissertation on a totally different subject, and then he went to Paris, establishing a tradition of scholarship and a set of students who revered him. Ten years later, he returned to Geneva, where his family had been scientific leaders for generations, and he spent the rest of his life deepening his knowledge of the Indo-European languages. In the last few years of his life, he gave a series of lectures on general linguistics which set the stage for the next hundred years. Although he did not live to write the lectures up into a book, his devoted students did that work for him after his death, and this book has continued to have enormous influence on thinkers not only in linguistics but in anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism.

But the second version of Saussure's life is what Joseph's book recounts, and in great detail. Saussure studied in Leipzig as a young man, and after a year of coursework he self-published a long monograph detailing his views on the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European vowels. His German teachers were stunned at how brazenly Saussure offered a reconstruction of Indo-European vowels that was an elaboration—brilliant, novel, but still—of what he had been taught in their courses. Fortunately for all, he submitted an entirely different and much more traditional work as his doctoral dissertation, and he was granted a degree—after which he was not much missed by his teachers. Saussure then spent ten years in Paris without publishing anything but a few brief notes, and unable to obtain a professorship—sadly he remained a *maître de conférences*. He spent a good deal of money he didn't have on horseraces, and made up for those losses winning at poker. He finally went back to Geneva, where he was named a professor. He continued to teach (though the students he had were few) and while he filled scores of notebooks with his research, he never succeeded in producing a book that satisfied his own standards, or even one that simply drew to a firm conclusion that could be offered to the world of scholarship. His students produced a festschrift in his honor when he turned 50, but he died a few years later, unable to see any accomplishments in his life past what he did when he was a very young man.

And the truth in all this? The reader is left to create his own truth, just as Saussure was. Along the way, he learns a great deal about the political and intellectual context in which Saussure's career developed, and how Saussure's world helped lay the foundation for our own today.