ABSTRACT. Saussure’s general linguistic is usually heralded for having sacrificed the speaking subject on a semiological altar and for initiating a methodological turn towards structured semiological systems as solely constitutive of cultural signification. This view may reflect, however, a postwar French institutionalized antagonism between the traditions of inquiry which privilege subjective experience on the one hand and semiological systems on the other, that is, phenomenology and structuralism (and post-structuralism). Thus while Kristeva opposes the speaking subject to Saussure’s linguistics and its structuralist legacy, I argue that Saussure’s own, lesser known reflections help to chart a zone of linguistic experience undecided between renewing subjectivity and sedimented signification. My contribution to rethinking the interrelation between subject and structure based approaches in this essay will follow the lead of Saussure’s Nachlass, especially his analysis of the arbitrary (unnatural or unmotivated) status of linguistic signification. While the posthumous edition of the Course in General Linguistics proposes a programmatic statement of scientific linguistics with a set of vertical hierarchies between la langue and la parole, synchrony and diachrony, and the signifier and the signified, the Nachlass develops a philosophically refined reflection on the heterogeneity of the linguistic field and the plurality of methods available to the scholar of language.

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1.

It has become a truism deemed too obvious for mention that Saussurean structuralism lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the tradition of phenomenology. Isn’t Ferdinand de Saussure the official founder of the structuralist movement in linguistics, subsequently extended to the human sciences and philosophy? Doesn’t Saussure’s method consist in studying language as a structured system of signs? Shouldn’t the subject which had been previously assumed to be the single source of the signifying process be sacrificed on a semiological altar once it is conceded that expression in the present is determined by the received and sedimented linguistic laws? Saussure’s general linguistics is usually heralded for having made this sacrifice indispensible, and for having thus initiated a methodological turn away from speaking subjectivity towards an emphasis on structured semiological systems. A representative sample of this established, polarized, view can be found in Sturrock’s *Structuralism*, where he writes:

Many of us like to think that when we use language we control it more or less totally and that it is we who determine the sequence of words or thoughts each time we write or speak; we are not happy to allow that language itself can prove more powerful than we are and that the association of the signs we have already used may be determining the choice of the signs to come. This loss of authority in the ‘speaking subject’ or language-user is a most important and contentious aspect of Structuralism, exploited to the full in post-Structuralism [...] and it can be traced back to this insistence of Saussure that the language-system impinges at every moment on language-events.\(^1\)

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1 Sturrock 2008, 43.
The imagined relation between the speaking subject and the language system suggests a battlefield where the speaker’s claims to authority and control over linguistic expression engage in a tug of war with the language’s own greater power to impose its set of historically weighed associations onto the speaking present. Yet it is unclear whether this vision of a conflict for absolute power waged between subject and system is a datum of experience that speaking subjects necessarily and universally have as we to engage in signifying process. It may also reflect an institutionalized antagonism between traditions of inquiry which privilege subjective experience on the one hand and semiological systems on the other, that is, phenomenology and structuralism (and post-structuralism). Yet two things can both be true: signification is structurally determined and subjects actively signify. Linguistic convention and invention coexist and are contingent one upon the other.

We can therefore consider another vision of speaking subjectivity that is best approached by a combined, descriptive and structure-based, mode of inquiry. This approach calls into question the presumed purity of classical phenomenological and structuralist methods; it reveals that the previously carefully policed borders between them may become a shared ground for mutually transformative encounters. As Kristeva argued, the speaking subject does not map onto the ego of transcendental phenomenology, this “penitentiary” subject walled into the prison of knowledge, and better associated with the ideal of a scientific metalanguage than the language in actu. The speaking subject is better described as a subject on trial and in process (en procès) that is worked through rather than competing for signifying resources with the object language. Kristeva therefore thematizes the speaking subject from the standpoint of a poetic subject who lives language as a mobile process in the manner of a poet rather than a knowing, scientific subject. She highlights an irreconcilable tension between the subject position in language

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2 Cf. KRISTEVA 2006.
3 Cf. KRISTEVA 2008, 306
approached by way of a poet through whom language speaks and the meta-stance assumed by a scientist who seeks to speak about language without being claimed or moved by it in turn. Kristeva can therefore argue that the speaking subject must be placed in opposition to Saussure’s linguistics and its philosophical offspring.4

While Kristeva opposes the speaking subject to Saussure’s linguistics and its structuralist legacy, I argue that Saussure’s own, lesser known reflections help to chart the very zone of linguistic experience undecided between renewing subjectivity and sedimented signification that I believe Kristeva charts in her own map of the semiotic and symbolic relations.5 These reflections contain an emphasis that «the language-system impinges at every moment on language-events»,6 yet it is not a vision of conflict between speaker and structure but rather a chiasm-like interplay of entangled forces that mark the shifting place we occupy in language. I argue that this lesser publicized variant of Saussure’s linguistics helps to decipher linguistic experience, and safeguards the thinker from deciding too quickly in favor of either phenomenological description of purified consciousness or structural analysis of semiological systems. It helps to think anew about our being-in-language, and reaches beyond, as well as before, the institutionalized schism of these two methodologies.

My contribution to rethinking the interrelation between subject and structure based approaches in this essay will follow the lead of Saussure’s Nachlass, especially his analysis of the arbitrary (unnatural or unmotivated) status of linguistic signification. Linguistic arbitrariness has been traditionally taken as evidence that the sign system is closed and autonomous (and thereby privileged as an object of study in modern scientific linguistics) but I argue that the impression of a disconnect between signification and reality stands in need of being corrected by the source materials from Saussure’s

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4 Cf. KRISTEVA 2006. I develop the interrelation between Kristeva’s and Saussure’s views of signification and poeisis in more detail in ‘Language as poeisis. Linguistic productivity and forms of resistance in Kristeva and Saussure’ (in press).
5 Cf. KRISTEVA 1984.
6 Cf. STURROCK 2008, cited above.

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Nachlass, which include student lecture notes, and Saussure’s autographed notes on general linguistics. As developed in Stawarska 2015 in more detail, the posthumous editorial rendering of Saussure’s linguistics in the Course in General Linguistics (1916) is at odds with a more complex and open-ended understanding of language found in the historically authentic texts. While the Course proposes a programmatic statement of scientific linguistics with a set of vertical hierarchies between la langue and la parole, synchrony and diachrony, and the signifier and the signified, the Nachlass develops a philosophically refined reflection on the heterogeneity of the linguistic field and the plurality of methods available to the scholar of language. The distinctions between la langue and la parole, synchrony and diachrony, and the signifier and the signified, do not map onto violent, vertical hierarchies but rather onto crisscrossing, provisionally drawn lines of force within a heterogeneous field. In this essay, I will focus especially on the intersection of the sign system and the social world to make a case that Saussure’s view of signification preserves rather than erasing the standpoint of speaking subjects. I will thus expose a phenomenological current running across the presumed bedrock of the structuralist doctrine, all in the hopes of softening the institutionalized antagonism and enabling a renewed rapprochement between structure and subject based approaches to language and experience. Admittedly, this analysis also raises a challenge to phenomenology: can speaking subjects be deciphered using classical phenomenological conceptions, or do they, in accordance with Kristeva’s argument, call for a revised understanding?

2.

It is still little known, in the philosophical circles at least, that scholarly research on Saussure’s linguistics of the last five decades has radically shifted the ways in which his intellectual heritage is interpreted. In response to the documented discrepancies between the edited version
of Saussure’s linguistics from the posthumous redaction of the *Course* by his presumed “disciples” and the source materials (autographed writings by Saussure, the student lecture notes from his courses on general linguistics at the University of Geneva 1907–1911), as well as the recently discovered and published autographed writings by Saussure, and in light of the revelations from the recently published correspondence between the main stakeholders in Saussure’s estate (the two editors of the posthumously published *Cours de Linguistique Générale, 1916/Course in General Linguistics*, and Saussure’s students and colleagues), contemporary scholars are shifting from the so-called *first* to the *second* editorial paradigm of Saussure’s *general linguistics*. In other words, Saussure scholars are gradually abandoning an earlier (the *first*) research paradigm which consisted primarily in a critical comparison between the 1916 posthumous redaction of the *Course on General Linguistics* and the source materials. While this approach helped to locate the manuscript sources of the editorial redaction of general linguistics (and also to establish a lack of manuscript evidence for some of the central claims made in the *Course*), it inadvertently maintained the status of the *Course* as central reference in Saussure scholarship, its documented shortcomings notwithstanding. In their passage to the *second* editorial paradigm, Saussure scholars are largely abandoning the *Course* and its structuralist legacy, and working solely with historically authentic texts.

Philosophical scholarship has lagged behind these scholarly developments, with the *Course* still serving as the official version of Saussure’s linguistics in scholarly publications and college-level pedagogy alike. It is therefore still common to identify Saussure’s linguistics with *scientific semiology*, but this view profoundly distorts Saussure’s philosophical and reflective approach to language, with its concomitant critique of scientific methods. In fact, when studied based on the texts from the *Nachlass*, his project exhibits a phenomenological orientation which preserves the standpoint of speaking subjects in the

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8 As presented in BOUQUET 1998.
signifying process. I turn to the question of linguistic arbitrariness to bear this point out.

3.

The received structuralist view of Saussure’s general linguistics foregrounds the signifier/signified distinction as the single most important contribution made by the Course. The terminological complex sign, signifier, and signified has been described as «perhaps Saussure’s most influential gift to Structuralism»;\(^9\) this distinction – «once it has been successfully understood» – would provide an unrivalled tool to the many discipline practicing textual analysis.\(^10\) The proper understanding goes something like this: by tying the graphic and/or acoustic sign to the signified idea in a manner that is arbitrary or unmotivated by reality, the signifier/signified distinction establishes the autonomy of language with respect to reality.\(^11\) The autonomy of language with regard to reality is established by the sign’s gathering of signification via the mainly contrastive relations of difference from other signs embedded within the structured system. Arbitrariness of the sign is therefore typically received as evidence of the structuralist view that language is a closed and autonomous system of internal relations. In Harris’ words: «The essential feature of Saussure’s linguistic sign is that, being intrinsically arbitrary, it can be identified only by contrast with coexisting signs of the same nature, which together constitute a structured system. By taking this position, Saussure placed modern linguistics in the vanguard of twentieth-century structuralism».\(^12\)

The according to which signification emerges solely within the structured system leads to a hierarchy of the signifier (\textit{signifiant}) over the signified (\textit{signifié}), since signification seems no more than a result

\(^9\) STURROCK 2003, 35.
\(^10\) STURROCK 2003, 35.
\(^11\) STURROCK 2003, 36.
\(^12\) Translator’s Introduction in SAUSSURE 1986, X.
of contrastive relations between the (signifying) entities like words, gestures, or images, and not due to their inherent expressive force. It is therefore not the category of the sign, but the narrower category of the signifier that gains primacy in the structuralist doctrine: the signifier’s authority is constrained exclusively by relations to its likes within the system, while the system is not constrained by anything of a different nature. Any notion of a signified transcendent to the signifier can therefore be dismissed, with access to reality or the real perpetually barred by the unsignifible barrier between the (elevated, upper case) Signifier and its effect: the signified. Saussure’s gift to structuralism was therefore a sign split in half.

Such a selective reception of Saussure’s linguistics was enabled by the fact that linguistic arbitrariness is defined in the Course with a focus on Saussure’s initial definition of the sign, and that the developments, complications and ultimate revision of this initially held notion were relegated to subsequent chapters, some of which occur in the later sections of the book. Specifically, the definition of the arbitrariness of the sign is discussed in Part I, General Principles, Ch. I. Nature of the linguistic sign; the subsequent developments of this thesis in terms of mutability of the sign in response to social and temporal factors occur in the subsequent chapter II. Immutability and Mutability of the Sign. The developments related to the sign in terms of linguistic value and the forces of the entire language system which render arbitrariness relative occur only in Part II, Synchronic Linguistics, chapters IV and VI. Even though a reader of the Course can find evidence of the many complications and revisions that befall the initial definitions of the sign: its acknowledged bond to the social world and temporality («[Language’s] social nature is one of its inner characteristics»; «Time changes all things; there is no reason why language should escape this universal law»,¹³ its embeddedness within a network of relations to other signs («in language there are only differences without positive terms»),¹⁴ she may be unlikely to perceive

¹⁴ SAUSSURE 1986, [166] 118.
them as organic elements of a discussion begun in the better-known sections from Part I, Ch. I; the reader of the Course may therefore miss the ways in which social and temporal factors bear upon the initial thesis related to «the nature of the linguistic sign» – considering especially that the dominant structuralist reception of the Course paid little heed to the social and temporal dimensions of the sign system, difficult as they would be to accommodate within a traditional scientific program of study. I develop a more detailed comparison between the editorial presentation and manuscript sources related to these issues below.

By turning to the source materials, the reader can better appreciate how the developments, complications, and revisions of the initial thesis of linguistic arbitrariness shift the emphasis from the sign considered in relative isolation to the constraining effects of the entire language system, as well as to the impact of social conventions and the historical reality of language. As a result, lack of motivation by external reality in the sign (a negative thesis) becomes re-defined positively as relative mediation by properties of the entire language system, as well as by historically sedimented and socially transmitted practices of language use. Contrary to the received structuralist view, the sign is tied to reality, but reality ceases to be defined in a naturalist and substantialist fashion as a «natural kingdom» or a rational order of things. The arbitrary link between the signifier and the signified does not suspend the link to reality tout court but to a metaphysical notion that reality is fixed and pre-ordained. The basic bond between word and world can then be preserved, but it gets figured more dynamically, as a socio-historical process.

4.

According to the materials from Saussure’s Nachlass (student lecture notes, esp. those by Constantin (the most complete source), and autographed sources), linguistic arbitrariness is not tied to the
linguistic sign considered in isolation, but to the conception of language as a system of signs. Linguistic arbitrariness is exposed as being relative and mediated by the semiological system. As put in Saussure’s autographed notes for the *Course in General Linguistics*:

Reduction in any system of *langue* of absolute to relative arbitrariness; this is what constitutes the ‘system’. If it was possible for a language (*une langue*) to consist solely in naming objects (*a dénominer les objets*), all the various terms in this language would have no relation among themselves; the terms would remain as separate from one another as the objects themselves.\(^{15}\)

Linguistic arbitrariness is here redefined as a property of the entire semiological structure, and it affects not only the signifying potential of individual signs but also the differential interrelations between signs in the system. Saussure will therefore ultimately claim that it is the contract between the *whole series* of signifiers and signifieds that is arbitrary.\(^{16}\) Differently put, it is the manner in which any given language parcels up or articulates signification that is arbitrary, since it is founded neither on the universal order of nature nor ideas; it follows that a language does not fully map onto other languages and their ways of meaning-making.\(^ {17}\) Furthermore, as discussed in more detail below, the series of signifiers and signifieds is inseparable from the historically situated community of language users. Linguistic arbitrariness is therefore not an objective property of a closed and autonomous system of signs, but it effectively intersects systemic “objectivity” with the “subjectivity” of historically sedimented and revisable social practices of language use. Social signification turns out to be socially and historically situated.

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17 As de Mauro put it, «Saussure uses *arbitrary* because this adjective expresses the non-existence of natural, logical, etc. reasons why the acoustic and semantic substance becomes articulated in a certain determinate fashion» (in *Saussure* 2005 [1967], 443).
This line of analysis was partially anticipated by Jonathan Culler’s work. Culler acknowledges the importance of motivation for understanding the language system, that is, that signs are motivated by one another even though they are also defined as unmotivated or arbitrary. He concedes – in reference to relevant source materials – that relative arbitrariness is essential to understanding arbitrariness tout court, against his own earlier stated views. Culler concludes that the two principles: that the sign is arbitrary, and that the linguistic system is a system of motivation, are interdependent. He writes: “It is because the relation between signifier and signified is unmotivated that langue becomes a system of motivation”.

Drawing on Derrida’s inspired reading of the Course in Glas, as well as Saussure’s reflections on analogical creation in language and textual analysis of the anagrams, Culler proposes that “Language motivating itself” may therefore be the most apt description of linguistic play.

I am in agreement with Culler that the principle of arbitrariness developed in Saussure’s Nachlass is not to be confined to the properties of an individual sign and extends onto the interplay of motivating forces within language as a whole. I contend, however, that such a systemic or intra-linguistic understanding of arbitrariness reflects only a single facet of a more complex process, and that arbitrariness becomes abstract if regarded solely as a system-bound phenomenon. While arbitrariness precludes natural motivation (where nature refers to a pre-ordained order of natural kinds, as noted above), it is positively defined in Saussure’s Nachlass as a multitude of temporally sedimented social conventions, which exert a motivating force upon language. Perhaps the “essence” of arbitrariness consists in its not being a solely linguistic mechanism but a socially and historically motivated process. Social and historical forces are at work even in the

19 Culler 2003, 57-58.
20 Culler 1986, 30.
21 Culler 2007, 127.
22 Culler 2007, 127.
23 This analysis is developed in more detail in Stawarska 2015.
case of an individual sign («Why do we say man, dog? Because before us people said man, dog»), and so individual significations are not absolutely unmotivated either but always already relativized by the properties of language as a whole as well as the apposite socio-historical conventions. Ultimately, it may therefore be misleading to attribute linguistic arbitrariness to an individual sign since the latter can hardly be maintained as a self-standing unit of analysis; such attributions may inadvertently return us to the view of language as a string of nouns or a nomenclature which Saussure overtly rejected.

It must be conceded that Saussure’s emphasis on the social and historical forces at work within the language system does partially transpire in the Course; it is addressed specifically in Part I, chapter II, on immutability and mutability of the sign. In this chapter, it is acknowledged that language (la langue) considered outside the social world would be made “artificial” (irréelle), and that the action of time combined with social forces helps to appreciate that language cannot be simply changed at will despite its conventional and arbitrary character. The placement of this chapter between sections on the arbitrariness of the sign (Part I, ch. 1), and the distinction between synchrony and diachrony (Part I, ch. 3), which received the most scholarly attention and “hypnotized” the readers of the Course (who either adopted or rejected them wholesale) likely contributed to a focus on the language system alone, at the expense of considerations related to language change and the social context of use. As a result, chapter II received little if any attention in the dominant structuralist reception of the Course – it is one of the least referenced ones. The discussion of immutability and mutability of the sign puts pressure, however, on the official view that general linguistics is an a-historical discipline and that language (la langue) constitutes an autonomous and closed system. If read deconstructively, against the stories told by its better-known neighbors in the book, this chapter would effectively

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24 SAUSSURE 1993, 97.
complicate the order of hierarchical dichotomies of *la langue* and *la parole*, and synchrony and diachrony by exposing the reality of linguistic change, and it would call into question the possibility of general linguistics being realized by way of traditional scientific methods by exposing the difficulty of fixing the reality of language into a static system.

5.

Turning now to the student lecture notes from Saussure’s course in general linguistics, it turns out that a purely systemic understanding of language is limited and ultimately highly abstract. The latter construes the language system (*la langue*) as an object dissociated from speech (*parole*). Such a partial focus is problematic because «that would only be language (*la langue*) apart from its social reality, and unreal (since comprising only one part of its reality). In order for there to be a language, there must be a body of speakers using the language. The language [...] is located in the collective soul right from the start».²⁷ This social fact is part of the definition of *la langue*,²⁸ in fact, this weight of the community would give language a center of gravity.²⁹ Saussure re-affirms this point in the autographed notes for the course: language (*langue*) divorced from social reality (*réalité sociale*) becomes unreal (*irréelle*); importantly, a speaking collectivity (*masse parlante*) is part of the «very definition» of language itself.³⁰

Language emerges therefore as a dual entity comprising the object-side: a systemic organization of signs, and the subject-side: a community of speakers with its stable and yet evolving conventions of usage. Yet even though the *socius* is the implied necessary subject, it is not to be thought of as an inventor or creator but rather a recipient of

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²⁹ SAUSSURE 1993, 97.
language from others, especially from past generations; still, the dominant patterns of usage as well as any linguistic change is contingent on a consecration by the society to take effect; language is therefore equally dependent on the effect of time, which sediments and gives weight to past usage.\(^{31}\) We speak a language borrowed from others at a time immemorial, and language echoes without having a definite source. As put in the notes for the course: «*Langue* is not unconstrained (*libre*), due to the principle of continuity or indefinite solidarity with previous ages»;\(^{32}\) temporality accommodates alteration of language and a shift in the system of values which a purely logical conception does not.\(^{33}\) Linguistic temporality does not therefore exclude change – there is mutability to a certain extent.\(^{34}\)

Social and historical factors can therefore be regarded as two facets of one complex phenomenon. Language «considered at any time, is always an inheritance from the past».\(^{35}\) It has always already received from previous generations: «never has any society known its language other than as a product more or less perfected by preceding generations and to be taken as is. In other words, we recognize a historical fact at the origin of every state of the language».\(^{36}\) A story of the origins can therefore only be told by historicized subjects.

While it is usual to think of language (*la langue*) as a closed and autonomous system, Saussure compares it to a social institution, like a school or church. Language is however unique in comparison to the other social institutions in that it has an unbreakable hold on our existence and pervades all areas of our life. Saussure notes that language employs thousands of signs, thousands of times per day, every day.\(^{37}\) We may not always be at school or in church, but we are always “in” language, just as much as language is “in” us. Language

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\(^{31}\) *Saussure* 1993, 97.

\(^{32}\) *Saussure* 2006, [335] 238.

\(^{33}\) *Saussure* 2006, [335] 238.

\(^{34}\) *Saussure* 1993, 98.

\(^{35}\) *Saussure* 1993, 94.

\(^{36}\) *Saussure* 1993, 94.

\(^{37}\) *Saussure* 1957, 10.
and society are therefore intimately coupled, and one cannot be understood in all concreteness without the other; this does not imply, however, that the community can be posited as the implied creator before the advent of language; Saussure notes that «since the aim of language, which is to make oneself understood, is absolutely necessary in any human society as we know it, it follows that every society is characterized by the existence of language». Language can therefore be compared to the many customs and habits used within the society for communicative purpose.

Language belongs together with other socially relevant signs, such as maritime signs, but also the rules of politeness, all the rites and customs whose character is eminently semiological and social. It will have to do with the gestures and practices which are signifying for social groups at certain times; Saussure notes that when a custom loses its meaning, we are faced with a case analogous to the one when the words of a language become unintelligible to the speaking subjects. A study of signs is therefore a study of signification, which is socially and historically inflected. The new study of language through the lens of signs will depart from the dominant, folk and philosophical conception of language as nomenclature, which suppresses the reciprocal determination of co-existent values in language. It will therefore be a study of signification in and through the systemic organization of signs, and not via the analytic approach which breaks the system down to individual signs.

The collective dimension of language leads to a comparison with a vessel in the sea whose course cannot be determined a priori, by its internal structure, just as the sign’s relation to a concept is not determined internally, by individual reason. The community provides the very environment (milieu) where language lives, and

38 SAUSSURE 2006, [179] 121.
39 SAUSSURE 2006, [178] 120.
40 SAUSSURE 1957, 19.
41 SAUSSURE 1957, 19.
42 SAUSSURE 1957, 20.
43 SAUSSURE 1957, 25.
language «is made for collectivity, not for an individual, like a vessel is made for the sea».\textsuperscript{44} Saussure emphasizes that

It is only when the system of signs becomes a thing of the community that it merits the name, is a system of signs at all. It is because the totality of its conditions of life is so distinct from this moment from everything which it can constitute outside of [the community] that the rest appears unimportant.\textsuperscript{45}

Saussure emphasizes that the “semiological phenomenon” never leaves this social collectivity behind. Even more, the social dimension of the sign counts as one of its \textit{internal} and not external elements, and language is equally a semiological and social product.\textsuperscript{46} The image of the vessel at sea should not then be construed as a container-like relation where pre-existent signs become subsequently inserted into the social world like a pilot into a ship. Signs are internally worked through by the \textit{socius}; without the historically sedimented and daily-renewed contract between speaking subjects there would be no signs and no signification at all. Finally, putting the ship out to open sea means allowing for unpredictable change: «if the community environment (\textit{milieu}) changes everything for the sign system, this environment is also the veritable site of development towards which the sign system tends from the start».\textsuperscript{47} To anchor language in a social milieu is therefore to abandon the notion of a closed and autonomous sign system.

«Langue, or indeed any semiological system, is not a ship in dry dock, but a ship on the open sea. Once it is on the water, it is pointless to look for an indication of the course it will follow by assessing its frame, or its inner construction as laid out in an engineers drawing».\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{44} \textsc{Saussure} 1957, 26.
\textsuperscript{45} \textsc{Saussure} 2006, [289] 202-203.
\textsuperscript{46} \textsc{Saussure} 2006, [290] 203.
\textsuperscript{47} \textsc{Saussure} 2006, [289-290] 203.
\textsuperscript{48} \textsc{Saussure} 2006, [289] 202.
Hence «only the ship at sea may yield information about the nature of a ship, and, moreover, it alone is a ship, an object available for study as a ship».  

A rationalist and individualist approach to language would then be not unlike that of an engineer who designed the internal structure of the ship but did not put it to use at the large sea, and so did not really know the ship in its appropriate context where it is subject to the many influences of the maritime environment. Saussure thus moves deliberately away from a Kantian understanding of language in terms of *a priori* categories and relations housed within an individual mind; a Kantian approach to language would be comparable to one which derives the trajectory of the vessel solely from its form, oblivious to the many unforeseeable movements of the sea which effectively guide the vessel on its journey. Forgetting the maritime environment in the case of a ship at sea is thus as shortsighted as forgetting the social environment in which language runs its course; attempting to thematize language via the categories of individual reason is akin to an engineer’s attempts to narrate fantastic stories featuring sea monsters and pirate attacks from the deck of a ship which had never left dry land.

If we accept the structuralist opposition between *la langue* and *la parole*, we are likely to view the relation between the social and the individual dimensions of language as being similarly oppositional (*la langue* would be made up of social conventions, *la parole* of individual acts of speaking). We would then need to assume that the speaking individual is to be evacuated from a structured language system in Saussure’s linguistics. The source materials offer however a more complex narrative; *la langue* is defined as a social product, tied to the many conventions and customs relative to usage; furthermore, the notion of *la langue* gets fleshed out in the context of speech (*la parole*), which itself is undecided between an individual act and a social act since it is inter-individual, and composed of a minimum of two participants («as far as language is concerned, the individual act

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50 Saussure 1993, 66.
supposes two individuals». Hence, even though Saussure defines *la langue* as a social fact, he does not forsake the individual to attain the social, but rather approaches the social *from within* the individual act: «The social act cannot reside elsewhere than in the individuals added together but as for any 'other' social fact, it cannot be considered outside the individual».

Speaking subjects are therefore ambiguously situated between individual and social facts; each one exercises an irreducibly individual faculty, since an act of speaking is tied to the singular individual and to the moment of utterance, the individual remains therefore master; however, the speaker deploys a deposit (*dépôt*) of verbal images coordinated among themselves and consistent among all individuals; the speaking individual is therefore a repository of socially determined processes, and as such each individual speech act partakes in the social life of *la langue*, even though the actual speech situation is limited to the two (or more) speaking/hearing individuals. While distinct, the two facets of *la langue* and *la parole*, social convention and individual speech act, are bound in a circular and mutually determining relation. Saussure instructs his students to take down verbatim the following remark (and insert it before the chapter dealing with the linguistic sign):

> There is nothing in *la langue* which has not entered <directly or indirectly> through speech (*parole*), that is through the sum total of speech acts received (*des paroles percues*), and, reciprocally, there is no speech possible before the development of this product called *la langue*, which supplies the individual with the elements for the composition of his speech.

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51 SAUSSURE 1993, 67.
52 SAUSSURE 1993, 69.
53 SAUSSURE 1993, 91.
54 SAUSSURE 1993, 69.
55 SAUSSURE 1993, 69.
56 SAUSSURE 1993, 91.
The individual and the social, the spoken and the structured dimensions of language intersect therefore in a chiasm-like relation, and are not radically opposed.

The socius is historicized; it is the necessary subject of language so long as it is figured as recipient of signifying conventions from the past generations, who similarly received and transmitted an inheritance via a trans-generational chain without a determinable beginning. Language is therefore not purely linguistic – it is enabled and reinforced by social conventions of use which have been transmitted from mouth to ear and from one generation of speakers to another. Language is an ongoing contract within a speech community which endures and is relatively resistant to change; even if this relative stability cannot be explained naturalistically, it supposes an inertial effect of shared investment in a tradition that arbitrary system of signs considered on its own cannot account for. This receptive stance and acknowledged passivity of the language user before the sign removes any remnants of voluntarism from language, considering that historically sedimented social practice largely constrains individual free choice in language use:

«The power of time constantly holds in check the power we may call arbitrary 'free choice'. Why do we say man, dog? Because before us people said man, dog. The justification lies in time. It does not suppress arbitrariness, and yet it does […] 'To sum up' the non-freedom of the signs which make up a language depends on its historical side, or is a manifestation of the factor time in the language, 'on the continuity of the sign across generation'».57

Saussure acknowledges the socio-historical weight of language on the speaking individual:

57 SAUSSURE 1993, 97.
in relation to the idea it represents, the signifier 'sign', whatever it may be, is arbitrary, appears to be freely chosen, is replaceable by another (table might be called sable or vice versa). In relation to the human society called upon to employ it, the sign is not free but imposed, and the social mass is not consulted: it is as if the sign could not be replaced by another. This fact, which to a certain extent seems to embrace contradiction of the non-freedom of what is free, 'his fact' could be called colloquially the Hobson's choice/forced choice (carte forcé). 'You say to the language:' 'Choose at random', but at the same time 'You have no right of choice, it must be this or that'.

The full socio-historical view of language is thus coupled at the subject side with the non-freedom of the speaking subjects, subjected as they are to the weight of traditional form which both enables and constrains individual expression. And while the dominant structuralist reception of Saussurean linguistics stipulates that the speaking individual is to be evacuated from the language system, the source materials state that an individual alone is powerless to effect lasting change; what is needed is the sanction and consecration of a community.

A socially situated view of language need to not give rise to a naïve narrative of origins whereby once upon a time there was a group of individuals that laid down a foundation for language and society by means of a “gentlemen’s agreement” in a mythical past. Saussure openly critiqued the 18th C. philosophical notion of social contract, understood as deliberate or voluntary consensus traceable back to an assumed, historical or mythical, source point in time. Firstly, it would impossible in principle to retrace an originary agreement or contract, and so the latter is only “theoretical”. In fact, the question of the

58 Saussure 1993, 94.
59 Saussure 1957, 17.

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origin of language does not have the importance one usually attributes to it, in fact, it does not pose itself since the moment of genesis cannot be seized or seen.\textsuperscript{60} The notion of social contract is better thought of as a permanent condition of language rather than an originary event; taken in this manner, the term highlights the collective dimension of language, an ongoing contractual relation between language users, which could be understood as a basic investment and trust in the signifying potential of language for oneself and one’s community. The philosophical idea of contract suggests a voluntary decision, but neither individuals nor social groups can change language at will.\textsuperscript{61}

The contractual dimension of language does not therefore issue from a voluntary agreement enacted at a zero point in time; it is traceable neither to a temporal nor to an agentive source point. To be sure, an invention of a full blown language system like Esperanto would have «an assembly of logicians and grammarians» as its necessary subject\textsuperscript{62} but a successful artificial language still depends on the social sanctioning by the language community across generations to exist.

As a collectively sanctioned medium, language is therefore amenable to social analysis and social critique; it figures as a vehicle of traditional values which can be both empowering and oppressive for the individual.\textsuperscript{63} While Saussure does not develop an approach geared specifically at such analysis and critique, his notion that linguistic signification and value bear the stamp of collective approval exposes their contingency and opens up possibility of creating a non-traditional set of linguistic and social values. Differently put, as a socially constituted medium, language is open both to the possibility of transmission and revision through the evolving practices of usage (see concluding remarks for practical considerations). It follows that an exclusively systemic focus on the signifier/signified distinction within the structuralist tradition leads to a disregard of the concrete, social and historical reality of language. The structuralist view contains and

\textsuperscript{60} \textsc{Saussure} 1957, 22.
\textsuperscript{61} \textsc{Saussure} 1957, 17.
\textsuperscript{62} \textsc{Saussure} 1993, 96.
\textsuperscript{63} See also \textsc{Thibault} 1997, 216.
conceals an ideological thesis that language is as fixed and immutable as the rational order of nature is assumed within substance metaphysics. Such views put forth a «highly ideologically constrained rationalization of the way language is used», where language «plays no role in the construction of the social reality of its users» .

Transcending the ahistorical rationalism implied within these ideologically charged views seems like a necessary step in reconnecting with the concrete reality of language, and reconsidering the possibility of social change in history.

6. Concluding remarks

Consider how the basic bond between language and the social reality of its users can be made more concrete by strategies of resistance to socially harmful language, like racial slur and sexist speech. There is a debate in contemporary scholarship about what constitutes a most apt strategy of responding to words that hurt: regulation, including government censorship of derogatory expressions, or reclamation wherein the expression gets re-signified within alternative practices of usage, and loses some of its historically accumulated potential to induce harm. The first approach could be deemed a top-down, since the state is called upon to intervene between the citizens and is charged with the power to prohibit linguistic expression and punish their users. The second is a bottom-up approach, since social groups themselves are empowered to negotiate what words signify and what effects they produce; in a felicitous case of reclamation like that of queer, an expression that previously carried the force of exclusion and contempt shifts to a celebratory term of self-affirmation within the LGBTQ group.

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64 See also Thibault 1997, 23-24.
65 Proponents of the regulation view include Charles R. Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, Richard Delgado, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (see Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, Williams Crenshaw 1993). Judith Butler, drawing on Bourdieu, J. L. Austin, and others, proposes reclamation as a more desirable alternative (cf. Butler 1997; 1999, 113-128); reclamation
Reclamation illustrates the social processes that go into the making and remaking of linguistic signification and force. This process is unsurprising if we accept, in agreement with Bourdieu and Butler, that language is a site where social forces and struggles for domination and recognition routinely play out. This means that language is neither an inert and neutral code that could be studied with scientific objectivity nor is it a sum total of subjective expressions by individual speakers. How many speakers does it take to re-signify queer? At what point does the new signification enter the canon of acceptable usage? Just as in the distinction between la langue and la parole, and synchrony and diachrony, the lines may be hard to draw and the exact sources of linguistic and social change difficult to point out. And yet at a historically tangible moment, a term of contempt becomes also a term of affirmation (at least in some contexts and for some speakers), and enters the linguistic code as such; the expression’s potential to quasi-automatically cause social harm gets stifled, and the phenomenological experience associated with it becomes complicated and multivalent.

The process of reclamation can be deciphered with the help of Saussure’s general linguistics. In agreement with Saussure, individual consciousness is powerless in the face of established social conventions; this does not imply, however, that all ties to consciousness and subjectivity are cut considering that linguistic signification is, in agreement with Saussure, arbitrary, that is, constituted by the many vicissitudes of social convention (and not only a capricious play of signifiers among themselves). Saussure’s general linguistics turns out therefore to be an unexpected ally within a practical as well as scholarly interest in tracking and exploiting the mutability of language, and it sheds light on efforts to re-signify language and to reclaim the terms of historically sedimented domination. It helps to decipher the otherwise perplexing fact that language is resistant to individual intent and that it can be worked through to surrender some of its

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is tied to the basic view that language is performative, a way of doing (and redoing, and undoing...) things with words.

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pernicious force, that it carries the weight of established norms and enables novel expressions in the present time. There is a message of liberation in Saussure’s linguistics for it suggests that while the speakers must borrow from the stock of existing signifying resources, the borrowing hand will leave a mark on the loan and what it returns will differ somewhat from what had been received. Perhaps the active role played by speaking subjects in the signifying process can be best studied within contemporary social movements that make a renewed claim to linguistic meaning and thereby alter the speaking subjects’ experience associated with historically harmful speech. I propose that this process can only be deciphered by means of combined, subject and structure based approaches to signification, which relies upon a possible rapprochement between phenomenology and structuralist linguistics; I propose also that this process can only be deciphered if we assume a pluralized base of speaking subjects, which calls for an expanded, socially situated and power relations sensitive, understanding of lived experience.

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