"This eternal wanderer":
A non-dogmatic reading of Saussure

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Abstract:

Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) has been widely received as a dogmatic text, putting forward a reductivist conception of the language system. Yet there are grounds for reading it very differently, as Roman Jakobson (1969) did when writing of Saussure's "dynamic repugnance toward the 'vanity' of any 'definitive thought'". Henri Meschonnic blamed "structuralists" (a label which, of course, gets applied to Jakobson himself) for turning Saussure's linguistics of the continuous into a dogmatic "scientism of the discontinuous". Meschonnic's list of structuralist distortions of Saussure is the framework for the argument presented here in favour of a non-dogmatic reading of the *Cours*.

Key words: F. de Saussure, structural linguistics, R. Jakobson, H. Meschonnic, *langue* and *parole*, syntagmatic and associative axes, synchrony and diacrony, iconicity

This paper owes a double debt to the Prague Linguistic Circle. The main title comes from Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), and the subtitle from an insightful remark by James Underhill of the Université de Rouen, following the Circle's 90th anniversary symposium in October 2016. Commenting on the papers given there and their authors, Underhill got to "John the Prophet Joseph who makes the Spirit of Saussure into Flesh and Blood without the dogmatism". It had not occurred to me before, but yes indeed, much of what puzzles me when people talk about Saussure having set this or that limitation on language or linguistics comes down to their reading the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) as dogmatic. I have always read it instead as Jakobson did, when he wrote of Saussure: "But perhaps the genuine greatness of this eternal wanderer and pathfinder lies precisely in his dynamic repugnance toward the 'vanity' of any 'definitive thought'. Then, the vacillation of his terms and concepts, the outspoken doubts, open questions, divergences and contradictions between his diverse writings and lectures within any single draft or course appear to be a vital constituent of an anxious seeking and restless striving as well as of his essentially multi-lateral view of language"[1].

It is a list of all the scholarly foibles we are taught to avoid, offered as a paradoxical account of Saussure's paradoxical greatness. Yet how often we hear linguists, semioticians, literary scholars and others proclaim their discovery that language extends beyond the limits imposed by Saussure's dogmatic reductionism, which supposedly aims to contain all of language within a rigid structure of arbitrary signs.

Another linguist who read Saussure as non-dogmatic, Henri Meschonnic (1932-2009), was severely critical of the "structuralists" whom he blamed for distorting Saussure's teaching. Meschonnic[2] lists nine points on which structuralists believed they were following Saussure but were in fact contradicting him. It is these structuralist contradictions that he contends have passed into general culture and been misunderstood as what Saussure taught. His list offers a good framework for explaining the non-dogmatic reading of Saussure which I endorse. Meschonnic's first three points concern how Saussure conceived of the language system:

> "1. [W]hen Saussure says system, a dynamic notion, structuralism says structure, a formal and ahistorical notion;
> 2. [W]hen Saussure proposes that with language all we have are points of view – a crucial notion: representations – structuralism with the sign presents itself as describing the nature of language;
> 3. [A]nd Saussure constructs the notion of point of view according to an entirely deductive (rational-logical) internal systematicity, whereas structuralism created descriptive (empirical) sciences of language [...]"[3].

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[1] Jakobson 1969, p. 8.

[2] Meschonnic 2009, p. 20.

[3] "1. [Q]uand Saussure dit *système*, notion dynamique, le structuralisme dit *structure*, notion formelle et ahistorique; 2. [Q]uand Saussure pose que sur le langage on n'a que des points de

These are all profound insights. The first two testify directly to the openness of vision in the *Cours*. Meschonnic is right, I believe, to point the finger at a structuralism that ironically includes Jakobson as one of its key figures; but he ought to have left some room for people such as Émile Benveniste (1902-1976), who get classified as structuralists despite their having distanced themselves from their contemporaries on some of these key points. As for the third point, I expect most linguists would consider a deductive approach to be more dogmatic than a descriptive one. Here though the "descriptive" of 3 connects with its etymological doublet "describing" in 2, where "describing the nature of language" is placed in opposition to "points of view". I read Meschonnic here as giving a version of Householder's[4] God's truth vs. hocus-pocus contrast, in which some structural linguists purport to discover and describe an objectively determinable structure, whereas others, like Saussure, see the system and the account of it as jointly constructed. Meschonnic seems to be calling in point 3 for "debinarising" the descriptive and the deductive, but his compact wording may make it sound as though he is instead trying to shore up the dichotomy. He wants to remind us that all deduction needs to start from description of some sort, and that "pure" description is a utopian ideal. Or maybe dystopian.

Meschonnic's next two points are about the relationship of *langue* and *parole*:

> "4. [A]nd Saussure thinks the unity of *langue* and *parole*, language and speech, in discourse, but structuralism disjoined as two heterogenous entities a linguistics of *langue* and a linguistics of *parole*;
> 5. [A]lso, in Saussure, the theory of language postulates and presupposes a poetics, whereas structuralism only managed to oppose the rationalism of the *Cours* to the madness of his notebooks on anagrams […]"[5].

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vue, notion capitale: des représentations, le structuralisme avec le signe se présente comme décrivant la nature du langage; 3. [E]t Saussure construit la notion de point de vue selon une systématicité interne toute déductive, mais le structuralisme a fait des sciences du langage descriptives […]".

[4] Householder 1952.

[5] "4. [E]t Saussure pense l'unité de la langue et de la parole, dans le discours, mais le structuralisme a disjoint comme deux hétérogènes une linguistique de la langue et une linguistique de la parole; 5. [A]ussi, chez Saussure, la théorie du langage postule et suppose une poétique, mais le structuralisme n'a su qu'opposer le rationalisme du *Cours* et la folie des anagrammes […]". As is well known, Saussure (1916) was put together posthumously by his colleagues Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye from his manuscript notes and the notebooks of students who attended his lectures at the University of Geneva. The *Cours* contains the essence though not the whole of Saussure's teaching, hence Meschonnic's remark in (5). The 99 notebooks that record his search for hidden anagrams in poems, mainly in Latin but also in Homer, became known through articles by Jean Starobinski starting in 1964, and culminating in the volume Starobinski 1971. The anagrams took the form of a key word, the theme of the poem or the name of its dedicatee, chopped up and rearranged within the poem following certain regularly recurring principles. Ultimately he could not establish definitively that the anagrams were created intentionally and were not the product of chance, and so he abandoned the project. When his notebooks on the subject came to light in the early 1960s, they were interpreted as showing Saussure's lack of faith in his own principle of the linearity of the

Anyone who claims that for Saussure the whole of language is contained in *langue*, the language system, has not read the *Cours* very carefully. The central problem it is wrestling with is how language can be systematic enough to function socially and yet be open to endless individual innovation, creation and expression. In the first course Saussure calls *langue* the individual side of language, and *parole* the social, which seems intuitively right since *parole*, speech, is how social interaction takes place. But he was still finding his path, and by the second course he has reversed himself: henceforth it is *langue* that is socially shared, and in *parole* that all our individuality is manifested.

Nor did he marginalise *parole*. He envisioned a linguistics of *parole* that would be parallel to the linguistics of *langue* that he was pursuing as a first step. Here the editors did not help matters by coming up with that final sentence of the *Cours*, which has no counterpart in the source materials: "*linguistics has as its unique and veritable object language* [la langue] *envisaged in itself and for itself*"[6]. It comes just after a paragraph in which Saussure distances himself from those who maintain that the "genius of a race" leads its language in certain deterministic directions; and indeed Saussure consistently rejects racial or ethnic determinism, quite dogmatically. In that sense, linguistics should be concerned with the language alone rather than with racial psychology, as developments in German linguistics in the 1930s would bear out. But not with *langue* as distinct from *parole*, which amongst other things is where all language change is generated. Diachronic enquiry is always in the background of Saussure's thinking, except when it is at the fore.

Point 6 is about the syntagmatic and associative axes:

> "6. [A]nd Saussure, as even the text of 1916 shows, opposes the associative, which is multiple, to the syntagm, when structuralism managed only to practise the binary opposition of the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic […]"[7].

In the 1930s, the Danish structural linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965) rechristened Saussure's "associative" axis as the "paradigmatic" axis[8], implying, for Meschonnic, a closed paradigm, as opposed to an indefinite web of associations. Noam Chomsky, another arch-structuralist[9], would attack "Saussure's conception of *langue* as an inventory of elements […] and his

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signifier, since an anagram is a signifier in non-linear order. However, linearity is an attribute of signifiers in the *langue* as Saussure conceives it; the poetic anagrams are a part of texts at the level of *parole*, individual production. There is no inherent contradiction between the linearity of the signifier in *langue* and the existence of anagrams in *parole*.

[6] "[…] *la linguistique a pour unique et véritable objet la langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même*" (Saussure 1916 [1922, p. 317]).

[7] "6. [E]t Saussure, ce que montre même le texte de 1916, oppose l'associatif, qui est multiple, au syntagme, quand le structuralisme n'a su que pratiquer l'opposition binaire du paradigmatique au syntagmatique […]".

[8] See Koerner 2000, p. 126.

[9] In my admittedly minority view, laid out in Joseph 2002.

preoccupation with systems of elements rather than the systems of rules which were the focus of attention in traditional grammar and in the general linguistics of Humboldt"[10]. The second part of this is false: "rules" in Chomsky's sense are found neither in traditional grammar nor in Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)[11]. But what Chomsky says about *langue* being an inventory of elements, which would exclude syntax, is not obviously wrong. Indeed it is widely believed that a great weakness of the *Cours* is to have dogmatically relegated syntax to *parole*. Various passages describe a language as a *trésor* (a set of valuables or a box or pouch for storing them), a *dépôt*, a *somme*, a *magasin*, in the brain of each of its speakers. Although it never says *inventaire*, "inventory" is a reasonable equivalent for the other terms. But an inventory of what? In its discussion of analogy the *Cours* says: "Every analogical creation must be preceded by an unconscious comparison of the materials deposited in the *trésor* of the *langue* where the generating forms are arranged according to their syntagmatic and associative relations"[12]. Forms arranged according to their syntagmatic and associative relations are much more than an inventory. If it is a system of elements, those elements include the grammar, and all the "rules" whereby the elements relate to one another both virtually (in associative relations) and through their syntagmatic combinations. No dogmatic exclusion of syntax from *langue*, then; no reduction of the language to an inventory of elements, conceived in opposition to rules. Instead, a flexibility as to where to draw the line between syntactic significations that are part of the *langue*, and where individuals have the freedom to combine in *parole.*

Meschonnic's point 7 concerns arbitrariness:

"7. [A]nd for Saussure the radical arbitrariness of the sign implies a radical historicity of language, of languages, of discourses (when we seek the origin we

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[10] Chomsky 1964, p. 23.

[11] Consider the prototypical Chomskyan "rule" S → NP + VP. Certainly S, NP, and VP are elements. As for what the rule consists of, Chomsky always leans toward treating rules as instructions for constructing derivations. (Constrains like the Binding Theory and the Empty Category Principle of GB were a departure, ultimately abandoned.) When he spells out rules informally in English they are given as imperatives, like a recipe: rewrite X as Y; Move α; Merge. In that sense, no "traditional grammar" ever had a "rule". Note also that McCawley (McCawley 1968) gave specific arguments for interpreting S → NP + VP as what he called a "node admissibility condition", i.e., as simply a licence for an element consisting of a small subtree with S at the top and NP, VP along the bottom. A well-formed tree under that conception is simply a system of such elements, related via their shared node labels. That makes context-free phrase structure grammar look much more like the Saussurean "system of elements" Chomsky is rejecting. In short, if what counts as rules for Chomsky are indeed rules for constructing derivations, as he has always maintained, they have no counterpart in traditional grammar or in Humboldt. If instead rules are interpreted as McCawley suggests, the sharp contrast between rules and systems of elements dissolves.

[12] "Toute création doit être précédée d'une comparaison inconsciente des matériaux déposés dans le trésor de la langue où les formes génératrices sont rangées selon leurs rapports syntagmatiques et associatifs" (Saussure 1916 [1922, p. 227]); see further Joseph 2014.

find the functioning), but in structuralism arbitrariness was understood as a conventionalism [...]"[13].

We can expand on this to note that the *Cours* includes a substantial discussion of "relative arbitrariness", in which Saussure recognises that the whole systematic nature of *langue* implies limits to the arbitrary. And although he dismisses cases of onomatopoeia as not being so directly imitative as they appear, the fact is that onomatopoeia inheres not within the linguistic sign, but in the relationship between a sign and a thing-in-the-world. Saussure did not deny that such relations exist, but considered their analysis to lie outside linguistics, hence beyond his competence to discuss. For example, to identify the Chinese words *miao* and *mao* as onomatopoeic is to posit a link between, on the one hand, the sonic realisation of a signifier and a sound-in-the-world (a cat's meow), and on the other, a signified ('cat') and the thing-in-the-world that makes the sound. But the arbitrariness principle applies *within* the sign. It succeeds in signifying regardless of whether a particular speaker or hearer perceives the onomatopoeia[14].

Similarly with synaesthesia: Saussure himself was deeply synaesthetic, and described in great detail his personal perceptions of the written forms of vowels for a research project by his psychologist colleague Théodore Flournoy[15]. However, he knew that his synaesthetic reactions were not shared by other speakers. Individual responses to language are not insignificant; but if speakers know that *pluit* means 'it rains' regardless of whether or not they hear a raindrop in the *pl-* of *pluit*[16]; if they understand *bien* and *rien*, regardless of whether the *-ien* calls up for them the colour of new rope as it did for Saussure; then for the grammarian analysing the *langue* as a social signifying system, the essential thing is that these words signify, just as do words like *livre* 'book', where any iconic link between signifier and signified seems far-fetched. Saussure published two articles proposing that sound symbolism, operating at the level of *parole*, played a role in language change[17]. He was not dogmatically dismissive of iconicity, just scrupulous about assigning it to its proper place within the analysis.

Meschonnic's point 8 is about synchrony and diachrony:

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[13] "7. [E]t chez Saussure le radicalement arbitraire du signe implique une historicité radicale du langage, des langues, des discours (quand on cherche l'origine on trouve le fonctionnement), mais dans le structuralisme l'arbitraire a été compris comme un conventionnalisme [...]".

[14] See Joseph 2015.

[15] Joseph 2012, pp. 393-397.

[16] The example is from Saussure, Constantin 2005, p. 222. The editors of the *Cours* replaced this with the French examples *glas* 'knell' and *fouet* 'whip' (Saussure 1916 [1922, p. 102]).

[17] Saussure 1877; 1912; see Joseph 2015.

"8. [A]lso, for Saussure, diachrony and synchrony together are history, and structuralism taught that diachrony was history, in opposition to synchrony, the state of language [...]"[18].

One often reads that Saussure wanted to halt historical enquiry in favour of synchronic analysis. According to oxfordreference.com, he rebuked the "diachronic" linguistics of his time because it "ignored the (to him, more interesting and important) problem of how to account for the existence and operation of language itself"[19]. Actually, he rebuked the historical linguistics of his time for *not* being the "diachronic" enterprise which he was the first to envision. All the work Saussure published in his lifetime was historical, as is nearly all the manuscript material he left behind. Even when he went out to mountain villages to collect dialect data, in the background was his desire to get information that would give clues to the historical development of the Indo-European language family. The diachronic linguistics he advocated, far from being in opposition to synchronic analysis, took it as its first stage. His methodological objection was against imagining that individual sounds and forms have a continuous existence that can be traced from Proto-Indo-European to Latin to French. This is to misunderstand the nature of language as a system in which, at any given point in time, the value of any element is a function of its relationship to other elements with which it shares an associative or syntagmatic axis.

Meschonnic's final point is about continuity within language:

"9. [W]ith the result that Saussure thinks the continuity of language and criticises the traditional divisions (lexicon, morphology, syntax), whereas structuralism was the triumphalism of a scientism of the discontinuous, following the dichotomies of the sign"[20].

We can add phonology to the list: even such basic traditional divisions as consonant and vowel were rethought from the ground up by Saussure, who treated them as functions that any sound could fulfil[21], while also reconceiving phonology as being of the same psychological nature as the other divisions.

I shall add one further point of my own to Meschonnic's list:

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[18] "8. [A]ussi, chez Saussure, la diachronie et la synchronie sont ensemble l'histoire, et le structuralisme a enseigné que la diachronie était l'histoire, qu'on opposait à la synchronie, état de langue […]".

[19] http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100547367 (retrieved on August 2, 2018).

[20] "9. [S]i bien que Saussure pense le continu du langage et critique les divisions traditionnelles (lexique, morphologie, syntaxe), alors que le structuralisme a été le triomphalisme d'un scientisme du discontinu, selon les dichotomies du signe". On the "continuous" in Meschonnic see Joseph in press a).

[21] See Joseph in press b).

10. Structuralism insists that language is fundamentally either social or psychological, with the other as secondary; whereas for Saussure it is fundamentally both.

Saussure referred to himself as a grammarian, and was scrupulous about not pronouncing on matters beyond the limits of his expertise. His silences are sometimes interpreted as dogmatically excluding various things from language, when in fact his position is that they may well have a significant role to play, but that these are matters for psychologists or physiognomists or philosophers to give their expert opinion on, since the grammarian can only speak authoritatively about the internal workings of language as a system of values, put into practice in speech.

Saussure's first course in general linguistics of 1907 contains considerable material on analogy as a psychological process involving unconscious or demi-unconscious thought. This material steadily decreases as his emphasis on the social nature of *langue* grows. A balance is reached whereby a *langue* "is a *trésor* deposited by the practice of *parole* in the subjects belonging to one same community, a grammatical system existing virtually in each brain, or more exactly in the brains of an ensemble of individuals; for the language is not complete in anyone, it exists perfectly only in the mass"[22]. If this joint psychological-social existence is paradoxical, it nevertheless anticipates present-day views about distributed cognition[23]. This makes it unsustainable to depict Saussure, as some do, as being dogmatically committed either to a social or a psychological stance.

The Saussurean system is sometimes called abstract, in a sense which implies that it is neither social nor psychological but exists in a Platonic heaven. This is understandable given how it is founded on values based on difference, rather than on sounds or meanings in the usual sense. The signifier is not sound, and the signified is not a thing[24]. But Saussure

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[22] "C'est un trésor déposé par la pratique de la parole dans les sujets appartenant à une même communauté, un système grammatical existant virtuellement dans chaque cerveau, ou plus exactement dans les cerveaux d'un ensemble d'individus; car la langue n'est complète dans aucun, elle n'existe parfaitement que dans la masse" (Saussure 1916 [1922, p. 30]); see also Joseph 2016.

[23] See Joseph 2018.

[24] As discussed in the article Joseph 2017, one of the more confusing choices made by the editors of the *Cours* was to include a picture of a tree as the signified in one of the diagrams illustrating the linguistic sign. It reinforced the common understanding that Saussure was trying to fight against, a "nomenclaturism" that takes a language to be a set of labels for things that exist in the world, or exist conceptually independent of their naming. Instead, Saussure taught, signifiers and signifieds come into existence jointly and simultaneously. If *sapling* or *hogget* existed as categories in nature, one would expect many more languages to have words for them. The signifying value of *tree* is a function of its difference from *sapling*, *shrub* and other similar plants. As for the signifier, the range of phonetic variants is by definition constrained only by its attachment to the signified: if it does not signify the signified, it is not a signifier. The signifying takes place in the mind of the hearer, where the sound perceived has to be compatible with a category – the phoneme – that Saussure sometimes describes as an acoustic image, though ultimately all signifiers, and all signifieds, are values.

was concerned with ensuring that his linguistic analyses were solidly grounded in what is psychologically real for speakers, and disdainful of what were for him the misguided abstract analyses of linguists.

I shall close with a case where Saussure really *was* dogmatic, for comparison's sake, and to reassure readers (and myself) that I am not idealising him. The *Cours* treats writing as not being language, just a secondary representation of it – which, as Derrida[25] showed, connects Saussure to a long tradition of thought going back to Plato. In the first course on general linguistics of 1907, Saussure banished writing from consideration on the grounds that it is the source of illusions, spelling pronunciations, which distort the real operation of language and its transmission over time. In the third course of 1910-1911, he appears to soften his position, treating writing and spoken language as two different modes of "executing" a *langue*, at the level of *parole*: "the only change would be the replacement of the acoustic images I mentioned by visual images"[26]. This is surprising: he has been describing signifiers as acoustic images, and this would seem to involve a fundamental change in their nature. But already in the second course of 1908-1909 he focussed on *langue* as a system of pure values generated by difference; and if the signifier is in the end a value, it should be realisable in different modes. Yet in the third course he still treats writing as a mirage producing "deviant" developments where spelling affected pronunciation in the history of French. He calls them "monstrosities" and characterises their study as "teratology"[27]. These terms make his insistence that writing is not language, only a secondary representation of it, sound all the more dogmatic. He could reconcile speech and writing in synchronic systems, but not in their diachronic development, where spoken means real, and writing distorts. Daylight[28] has made a good case for rescuing Saussure from the contradictions which, Derrida argued, Saussure's rejection of writing poses for other aspects of his conception of language; but even if this is right, the dogmatism does not disappear. This was a point that hit close to home for Saussure, since *Genève* is the result of a spelling pronunciation (with the stress moved from the first to the second syllable of its Latin etymon *Genava*; cf. German *Genf*), and *Genthod*, where his family's summer home was located, traditionally pronounced *Genthou*, was increasingly being pronounced instead the way it "looked" from its spelling, which upset Saussure[29]. And spelling upset was a family trait: his uncle Théodore, who was like a second father to him, even published a book entitled *Étude de la langue française: De l'orthographe des noms propres*

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[25] Derrida 1967.

[26] "En cela il [Whitney] suivait la voie juste; il est d'accord avec nos idées […]. C'était juste car il faisait bon marché de l'exécution. Cela revient à ce que nous disions: le seul changement c'est que les images acoustiques dont nous parlions seraient remplacées par des images visuelles" (Constantin's notes, in Saussure, Constantin 2005, p. 88).

[27] Saussure 1916 [1968-1974, pp. 88-89].

[28] Daylight 2011.

[29] The old pronunciation is today entirely forgotten except by historians.

et des mots étrangers introduits dans la langue[30], concerned, as the subtitle states, with "the spelling of proper names and foreign words introduced into the language". That was not Ferdinand's worry. Rather, he had enough Neogrammarian instincts from his Leipzig years to want to believe in the purity of linguistic evolution, and as a scholar of ancient languages who depended on written texts as his data source, he needed to trust them as accurate records of the language of their time, rather than as agents driving change in those languages, as he was hearing happen around him. But his doctrinaire dismissal of writing was exceptional and made for a bad fit within his conception of language, as Derrida detected.

I claim no unique understanding of Saussure, such that anyone who disagrees with me has foolishly misread him. If they emerge from their reading with a Saussure that works for them, that is not to be discounted. People open the *Cours* for a reason, generally involving some concept, model or technique they or their teachers are promoting or contesting or just striving to understand. Theirs, like mine, will always be a partial Saussure, in both senses of the word. That is inevitable. The job of those of us who make Saussure one of our specialisms is to help guide them toward our best understanding of his teaching, when what they seek is a textually authentic Saussure, whether the authenticity is to the *Cours*, its source materials or earlier abandoned manuscripts. We would though be like King Cnut trying to stop the tide were we to insist that our reading, however well-documented, is the sole legitimate one. To maintain this would be dogmatic.

The strongest evidence for a non-dogmatic reading of Saussure is that, in the end, he was never quite certain enough to publish the book on language which he had been working on in one form or another for 35 years. Others had to pin down the text; and once committed to the page, any text is open to being read as definitive, even if its author's intention was to wonder, and wander, eternally.

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[30] Saussure 1885.

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