

INTEGRATIONAL LINGUISTICS AND THE STRUCTURALIST LEGACY

Roy Harris

Integrational linguistics is often seen as being an essentially neo-Saussurean enterprise. In this paper I shall comment – necessarily briefly – on some aspects of that perception and on the structuralist legacy in general, and in so doing supplement some earlier observations already published in 'Saussure, generative grammar and integrational linguistics' (Harris, 1995).

Since integrationists treat the importance of context as an article of faith, let us first try to contextualize the question "Is integrational linguistics neo-Saussurean?" It is a question most likely to arise, doubtless, in discussing the history of modern linguistics; and here straight away, as I see it, a problem arises. It is unfortunately the case that for many students the history of modern linguistics reduces to a list of "big names" (of which Saussure's is undoubtedly among the "biggest") and an associated list of *-isms* (beginning with *comparativism* and including *structuralism*, *functionalism*, *generativism*, and so on). On this basis, one can draw neat diagrams which supposedly display the relationships and "influences" that have structured the narrative that the omniscient historian of linguistics tells. Thus if the answer to our question turns out to be an unqualified "yes", *integrationism* will be slotted into the framework via a genealogical line that descends from the belly of the name "Saussure" and thus makes integrationists first cousins of linguists engaged in other – quite different – neo-Saussurean enterprises: for example, *glossematics*. And this is odd. For it is difficult to imagine an integrationist feeling any temptation to engage in the kind of analysis that preoccupied Hjelmslev. And no less difficult to imagine Hjelmslev finding the axioms of integrational semiology at all congenial to his way of thinking about language.

So my first point is that this would be a deplorable way to approach the history of linguistics (although it is an approach that is commonly encountered not only in the teaching of the history of linguistics but in the teaching of many other branches of the history of ideas). If the question "Is integrational linguistics neo-Saussurean?" is raised in *this* kind of discussion, the only appropriate integrationist response seems to me to be to reject the question altogether.

It is undeniable, however, that integrationists do often discuss Saussure, state their position by reference to Saussure, and have even contributed in some measure to a modern re-evaluation of the work of Saussure. Does not all that suffice to qualify them as paid-up neo-Saussureans? And is not the perception that they *are* neo-Saussureans confirmed by what integrationists themselves have said. For example, on p.319 of volume 1 of the *Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of Linguists* we read that "the goal of an integrational linguistics is [...] one which Saussure failed to achieve" (Wolf and Love, 1993). The goal in question is identified by reference to the famous statement about linguistic realities on p.128 of the *Cours de linguistique générale* (Saussure, 1922): "In order to determine to what extent something is a reality, it is necessary and also sufficient to find out to what extent it exists as far as the language users are concerned." In their *Proceedings* paper Wolf and Love contrast this position with the more recent generativist view that much linguistic knowledge is "inaccessible to

consciousness". Thus the integrationist approach is overtly presented as "reinstating" (the term they use) the importance of "speakers' views about the form in which they communicate". Now such an account of the matter might appear to have quite clear historical implications: *viz.* that integrationism is in some sense or in some respects a reversion to an earlier Saussurean view of linguistic realities. That interpretation, it seems to me, would be quite mistaken for various reasons. In the first place, because of the ambivalence of the phrase "speakers' views". There has been much debate in modern linguistics about the status of the native speaker's linguistic "intuitions" – an unfortunate and misleading term if ever there was one – and this debate cannot be continued here. But it should be noted that Saussure nowhere advocates that the linguist should go round asking informants for their views – for example, about what they think such-and-such a word means or how it should be used or pronounced. Whereas that is precisely what integrationists are prepared to do and have done in particular instances (e.g. Davis, 1997; Wolf et al., 1996).

In the second place, it is extremely doubtful whether what Saussure regarded as linguistic realities are linguistic realities for the integrationist. Indeed, the Saussurean statement about linguistic realities that Wolf and Love quote comes from a passage of which the main purpose is to make clear the difference between synchronic and diachronic linguistics. The linguistic realities in question are "synchronic" realities. Now integrationists do not accept the synchronic-diachronic dichotomy, which is one of the foundational Saussurean distinctions. So it is hard to see how they are in any theoretical position to endorse or reinstate the version of psychological realism that Saussure was advocating.

In the third place, Saussure's linguistic realities are *faits de langue*, not *faits de parole*. And again the *langue-parole* dichotomy – at least, as drawn by Saussure – is not one that integrationists can accept.

In short, as soon as we begin to probe the comparison between Saussure's focus on the language user and the integrationist's insistence on the lay-orientation of any viable linguistics, the similarity quickly starts to vanish before our eyes. All we are left with is a kind of disembodied analogy, a theoretical counterpart to the grin of the Cheshire cat.

A somewhat different interpretation of the Saussurean legacy is captured in Nigel Love's pithy phrase "transcending Saussure": a phrase used some years ago as the title of a critical review of several of my own publications (Love, 1989). Love wrote: "The Saussurean language myth is not so much to be rejected as encompassed and transcended" (Love 1989, p.817). A pedant might perhaps fasten on the hedging formulation "not so much to be rejected as..." and say: "This won't do: is to be rejected or not?" And another question that comes to mind is whether it is possible to transcend something and subvert it at the same time.

Love, fortunately, has since given us a clear illustration of how he understands the "encompassing and transcending" operations. This is in his paper 'The locus of languages in a redefined linguistics' (Love, 1990). Although Love does not explicitly say there that he is showing us how to encompass and transcend the language myth, I shall take it that this is in fact what he is about; and I shall draw from this example some conclusions about the structuralist legacy in general.

What Love, it seems to me, accepts as a lay linguistic reality is simply the fact that in many communities people do regard themselves as speakers and/or writers of a particular language, as

witnessed e.g. by the fact that they have no hesitation in identifying that language by name (as e.g. "English", "French", etc.). To this extent their behaviour might be regarded as confirming the Saussurean doctrine that the world is full of languages (*langues* in the plural). Furthermore, they might – or might not – entertain *about* the language (sc. the language they believe themselves to be users of) beliefs which correspond to Saussure's version of the language myth: e.g. that it provides a fixed code which enables them to exchange their thoughts with other members of the same linguistic community. In fact, if they are educated Europeans it is more than likely that they will indeed entertain such beliefs, because that is roughly what their education will have conditioned them to believe. Perhaps they will be less likely to endorse a Saussurean view of the relationship between speech and writing: they might take a thoroughly unSaussurean view and believe that the written form of their language is somehow superior to its spoken forms, or at least provides a standard by reference to which "correctness" is to be measured. In other words, the lay view of languages may not on all points run exactly parallel to canonical Saussurean doctrine, but at least there is no crucial conflict on issues concerning the existence of a fixed code and its communicational function. To the extent that this is so, for at least some linguistic communities, and to the extent that the integrationist recognizes it to be so, the integrationist account may be said "not so much to reject as to encompass" the language myth. How about transcending it? We will come to that in a minute.

First of all, let us not overlook the important fact that "encompassing" the language myth in this sense does *not* constitute either an endorsement or a development of Saussure's theoretical position on *langue* and *parole*. The language myth is being taken on board not as a profound theoretical insight but as an approximate *de facto* description of how lay language users see their own linguistic situation. And in that sense Saussure is both right and irrelevant: that is to say, the only reason why Saussure enters into the picture at all is that he put forward a theory that, in certain basic respects, captures what the integrationist recognizes as an important complex of lay linguistic beliefs. That is why Saussure – and not e.g. Mao Tse-Tung or Marilyn Monroe – features in the story.

In the second place, my caveat "to the extent that the integrationist recognizes" this congruence between Saussure's language myth and a complex of lay beliefs was meant to allow for the consideration that in any case that congruence involves a certain oversimplification. Saussure's language myth applies, strictly speaking, only at the theoretical level of the idiosynchronic system; whereas it is doubtful that many lay language-users think of their "language" as an idiosynchronic system at all, and if they do they are perhaps unlikely to have a name for it. (The kind of English we speak and write at 2 Paddox Close, Oxford, may well be recognized by us and others as idiosyncratic, but it is not recognized as a separate language called "Harrisian", either by the denizens of 2 Paddox Close or by anyone else.)

Third, "encompassing" the language myth as a lay linguistic reality does not entail accepting the position that some theorists have argued for, according to which a language is simply what – and whatever – its users think it is. (The case for this view is put forward with admirable clarity in Pateman 1983; but it seems to me a case that the integrationist must reject.)

Fourth, none of this commits the integrationist to the assumption that the language myth is universal, i.e. the foundation of *all* lay linguistics beliefs in *all* communities. It so happens that Western "linguistics" is a discipline of which, historically, structuralism is an important phase. But history might have taken a different path.

I mention these four provisos because unless they are clearly borne in mind the notion that integrationism "encompasses" the Saussurean language myth seems open to all kinds of potential misconceptions of a more or less ethnocentric kind.

Now for "transcending" it. What I take Love to be saying – and showing – in Love 1990 is that the integrationist's task comprises two essential parts. The first of these is aptly called "demythologization". This consists in showing how and why certain linguistic assumptions, whether entertained by the laity or by professional linguists, fail to stand up to scrutiny. (Because these assumptions are unfounded, misleading, irrelevant, self-contradictory, or otherwise repugnant to intelligent acceptance.) The second and subsequent part of the task has no generally recognized label, but I will call it for convenience "reorientation". (Perhaps someone will think of a more satisfactory term.)

Reorientation, as I envisage it, involves explaining what are or were the sources of the myth that has just been exposed, and recouping from its demythologization whatever fragments of sense it contained. And here I should like to repeat what I have said elsewhere; namely, that much of what is wrong with modern linguistics – and with modern thinking about language generally – is wrong not because its propositions are straightforwardly false, but because the limited truth they contain is presented in a badly skewed perspective. (It would be much healthier for everybody if they *were* demonstrably false; but that would make the life of an intellectual altogether too comfortable for comfort.)

The structuralist legacy includes a great deal that it would be foolish for integrationists to reject outright. For instance, that recognition of linguistic "units" of various kinds is a function of their perceived contrast with other units of the same order: this seems to me a Saussurean breakthrough in our analytic understanding of language. But this insight is badly skewed when it is made to support belief in a fictional entity called "the phoneme" (of which, as a former colleague of mine used to insist at great length, there are no more and no less than 44 - or was it 42? (I forget) - in "the" language called "English").

Now in some cases the demythologization will leave nothing left that is worth recouping and reorienting at all. For instance, if you demythologize the notion that linguistic forms have fixed meanings, one consequence of this is that certain semantic problems that orthodox linguists have spent much time arguing about are revealed as non-problems. To illustrate this, take the distinction between homonymy and polysemy. There is a revealing case history in Ullmann (1959, p.115). Ullmann may be not unfairly described as a Saussurean structuralist or fellow-traveller, and he agonizes over the question of whether the use of the word *capo* in certain North Italian dialects to mean 'wheel hub' is an example of homonymy or polysemy. For *capo* also means 'head' (in reference to the part of the body supported by the neck). So are there are two words here or just one word with two related meanings? This is a typical problem for fixed-code semantics.

Now once an integrationist has demythologized the distinction between homonymy and polysemy, there is, as far as I can see, nothing remaining about the *capo* case that either requires or invites a reorientation. The problem that Ullmann tries to resolve (by deploying, incidentally, some very specious arguments that I cannot dissect here) is purely an artifact of the theoretical framework he is using. It has no reality at all for the language users. (Or at least, if it has, Ullmann gives us no reason to think so.) This is not to say that I regard it as of no conceivable interest whatsoever to examine what a wheel hub is called in Northern Italy: simply

that the "linguistic" problem of whether the word for 'wheel hub' is "the same word" as that for 'head' is a bogus problem. Before taking it seriously, an integrationist would need convincing that there were actual communication situations in which the issue arose for speakers and hearers as one of understanding or failing to understand what was said.

The case with Love's "relocation" of the concept of "languages" is altogether different. Here we do indeed have something to "relocate", something that has survived the demythologization. And Love "relocates" (or "reorients") it by showing how it arises as a second-order construct, supported by a metalanguage and the availability of writing.

Anyone who has understood Love's message in all this (and, admittedly, it is fairly sophisticated and not the kind of message that you would win a general election on the strength of) seems to me to have grasped at least two propositions. (Whether they are propositions you agree with is a quite different matter.) One is that the structuralist legacy is not to be ignored (however wrong-headed Saussure might have been) because it reflects, however indirectly, certain important lay views concerning language. The other is that *through* the demythologization of that intellectual legacy, you are in a position to see how the ideas it brings into play relate to your own understanding of your own linguistic experience. And that, for me, is doing integrational linguistics.

That may seem to some too cautious or too anodyne a conclusion. If so, they underestimate what is going on in integrational analyses such as Love's. I am reminded of the remark of a very experienced political commentator who, when asked to agree that the scale of the Conservative defeat in the 1997 U.K. general election meant that the Conservative party theorists needed to "go back to the drawing board", replied: "No. That would be disastrous. What they need is a new drawing board."

Something similar applies in the linguistic case. Indeed, if the integrationist critique of structuralism is on target, a new drawing board was not only needed but is already being provided.

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