Saussure and relativism

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1. Introduction
Both linguistic and epistemological relativism have been characterized as “saussurian”. Linguistic-relativistic programs such as Weisgerber’s *Inhaltbezogene Grammatik* and Trier’s *Wortfeldtheorie* are often explicitly regarded as based upon Saussure’s view of language (cf. Helbig 1974: Ch.4; Ehlers 2000). Similarly, quite a few scholars assume a parallelism between Saussure’s view of language and Kuhn’s relativistic view of science. For example, Harris (1983: 393) speaks about “the major thesis of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, one of the constellation of philosophical arguments frequently conflated with Saussure’s *Cours*” (cf. also Psaty & Inui 1991 and Soler 2004).

Despite these alleged relativistic implications of Saussure’s views, the remarks made by Saussure himself about possible relations between language and thought or worldview are extremely cautious, if not negative. In Part 5, Chapter 4 of the *Cours*, Saussure says about the idea that language sheds light upon anthropological or ethnographical questions: “Nous pensons qu’il y a là une grande part d’illusion”. He concludes this chapter by saying about grammatical classifications of languages: “…de ces déterminations et de ces classements on ne saurait rien conclure en dehors du domaine proprement linguistique” (Saussure 1972: 304, 312).

These passages seem to imply that those who attribute relativistic views to Saussure are entirely wrong. However, this may be too bold a conclusion. Most scholars interpreting Saussure relativistically base this idea upon Saussure’s general conception of languages as closed systems of interrelated elements, which derive their formal and semantic identity from their position within the system. It is at the level of meanings and/or concepts, that this central idea of larger structures is equated with Kuhn’s view of self-contained *paradigms* in science and Trier’s view of *Wortfelder* connected with classification systems in language communities. In drawing these parallels, Saussure’s remarks in part 5, Chapter 4 of the *Cours* are completely ignored. This is in line with the general tendency, going on for many years now, to neglect this part of the *Cours* (cf. Ehlers 2000:57).

This, of course, raises the question of whether Saussure’s conception of language systems, despite his own remarks, implies linguistic and/or epistemological relativism.

2. Saussure and linguistic relativism
Let us first have a look at linguistic relativism (LR). As is well-known, there is not one concept of LR; on the contrary, the term “linguistic relativism” covers a multitude of views, which share the common element: *language controls mental life*. All three elements of this statement can be and have been interpreted in very different ways: many aspects of language are assumed to control, in varying degrees, many aspects of mental life. Therefore, we have to refrain from talking about LR in general; to avoid confusion or vagueness, we always have to specify the content of the LR *variety* at issue.

How can we establish whether Saussure’s general conception of language implies some particular variety of LR? Saussure himself talks about language and about nothing else. He defends a strictly linguistic approach to language; neglect of this principle is regarded as the main defect of earlier linguistic schools. The idea that the boundaries of the linguistic domain are not to be exceeded, as explicitly expressed in the above quote from one
of the last pages of the *Cours*, is consistently defended from its first pages onwards. Linguistic data cannot form the basis of conclusions about extralinguistic phenomena. So if there is any variety of LR in the *Cours*, we have to look for implied relativistic elements in his theory of language, elements not presented in relativistic terms by Saussure himself.

### 2.1. Anti-relativism in the *Cours*

At first sight, the way in which Saussure elaborates his theory appears to be largely anti-relativistic. Apart from the passage quoted above, saussurean general insights are in direct conflict with some varieties of LR that were prominent during the nineteenth century. The decline of these 19th-century types of linguistic relativism during the first decades of the 20th century is, at least partially, due to the general adoption of a saussurean linguistic approach (cf. Elffers 1996).

A demonstration the incompatibility of saussurean views with 19th-century LR need not be an abstract exercise, because it can actually be found in the work of the German linguist Von der Gabelentz (1840-1893). Gabelentz is generally regarded as a precursor of Saussure in many respects. But he also continues the 19th-century humboldtian tradition, including a lively interest in language-thought relationships. This results in an interesting mix of involvement in typically 19th-century relativistic issues and a very modern, semi-saussurean critical attitude towards some prominent relativistic patterns of reasoning. I think it is possible to distinguish three patterns; I will describe Gabelentz’ objections to them in my own terms:

**a) the etymological pattern.**

Relativistic conclusions are often based upon etymology. For example, the different etymologies of English “handkerchief” vs. Dutch “zakdoek” (“pocket cloth”) is supposed to reveal different ways in which both peoples conceive of these objects. Gabelentz rejects this reasoning pattern as an anachronistic confusion. He claims that the alleged conceptual difference applies to primeval times at best, but cannot be attributed to present-day language users.

**b) the prototypical pattern**

Relativistic conclusions are often based upon semantic prototypes. According to this line of reasoning, the different prepositions in English “by train” vs. Dutch “met de trein” (“with the train”) would reveal different conceptions of the content of the phrases in question. This conclusion presupposes identical prototypical meanings of the prepositions *by* and *with* in the two languages. Similarly, in his discussion of LR, Gabelentz mentions a language in which it is possible to say things like “I see cold, hunger, fear” etc. instead of “I feel cold” etc. In accordance with a really saussurean differential view of meaning, his conclusion does not go any further than that there must be different lexical divisions in different languages: in the language at issue, “see” has adopted the broader meaning of “perceive”.

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1 In the very last sentence of the *Cours*, after some negative remarks about the belief in the “genius” of a language/ethnic group (a type of LR I will not discuss here), Saussure summarizes “l’idée fondamental de ce cours” as follows: “la linguistique a pour unique et veritable objet la langue envisagée en elle-même et pour elle-même” (Saussure 1972: 317).

2 Saussure makes an exception for small-scale lexical phenomena like kinship terms, which are informative about family institutions of linguistic communities (cf. Saussure 1972: 308).

3 As we will see below, Weisgerber’s ideas are an exception to this general decline.

4 I refrain from statements about the Gabelentz-Saussure relationship in terms of influence. In discussions about the similar views of the two scholars, no attention has been paid, thus far, to the saussurean character of Gabelentz’ anti-relativistic remarks.

5 Gabelentz’ statements can be found in Gabelentz (19012:393-398). Cf. also Elffers (1996).

6 Saussure also briefly mentions the misuse of etymology in the “anti-relativistic” chapter of the *Cours* (5, IV) mentioned above.
c) the deficiency pattern
Relativistic conclusions are often based upon the observed absence of certain grammatical forms or properties. For example, 19th-century linguists did not hesitate to regard the absence of a case system as implying that the corresponding semantic relations could not be expressed, which, in turn, was seen as a signal of “formless thought”. Gabelentz rejects this approach as too piecemeal: you have to take into account the language system as a whole. In that case, one discovers that a language may have alternative means of expressing what apparently could not be expressed.

What we observe here is a threefold pre-saussurean attack on some powerful relativistic reasoning patterns. All three of Gabelentz’ “weapons” (in modern terms: diachrony vs. synchrony, a differential view of the lexicon, and language as a holistic system) were elaborated by Saussure into fully-fledged building-blocks of his overall linguistic theory. So the anti-relativism presented at the end of his book turns out to be tightly related to his overall theory.

2.2. Saussurean relativism?
In order to understand how Saussure’s view of language, nevertheless, could be interpreted relativistically, we have to concentrate upon his differential view of the lexicon. A closer analysis of this idea reveals that, despite what was said above about its anti-relativistic implications, this view may also lead to a new variety of LR. The following passage of the Cours is crucial. It is the passage in which Saussure expounds the idea that language divides the sound space and the cognitive space into separate dual entities of sound and concept. I quote the most relevant sentences, leaving out the well-known figure that represents the two parallel amorphous masses of thought (level A) and sound (level B), with perpendicular lines representing the simultaneous linguistic divisions of the two masses.

“Psychologuement, abstraction faite de son expression par les mots, notre pensée n’est qu’une masse amorphe et indistincte. Philosophes et linguistes ne sont toujours accordés a reconnaître que, sans le secours des signes, nous serions incapables de distinguer deux idées d’une façon claire et constante. Prise en elle-même, la pensée est comme une nébuleuse où rien n’est nécessairement délimité. Il n’y a pas d’idées prêtables, et rien n’est distinct avant l’apparition de la langue […] La substance phonicque n’est pas plus fixe ni plus rigide […]. Nous pouvons donc représenter le fait linguistique dans son ensemble, c’est à dire la langue, comme une série de subdivisions contiguës dessinées à la fois sur le plan indéfini des idées confuses (A) et sur celui non moins indéterminé des sons (B) […] Il n’y a donc ni matérialisation des pensées, ni spiritualization des sons, mais il s’agit de ce fait en quelque sorte mystérieux, que la “pensée-son” implique des divisions et que la langue élabore ses unités en se constituant entre deux masses amorphes.” (Saussure 1972: 155-156)

If language has the power to decompose amorphous thought into separate concepts, different languages, which decompose thought in different ways, bring about conceptual differences as well. To borrow an example from Saussure himself, in English the concept ‘sheep’ differs from the concept ‘mutton’. French, however, does not distinguish the two forms, but has one word (“mouton”) covering the undifferentiated conceptual totality of the words “sheep” and “mutton” (Saussure 1972: 160).

This view certainly qualifies as a variety of LR: it is language which structures amorphous thought into separate concepts. Moreover, Saussure’s emphasis on the holistic network-like character of the language system also implies a considerable diversity of language and thought. All elements of a lexical organization hang together with all other elements.
Consequently, any change in a system implies, through rearrangement of the conceptual mass, the rise of an entirely new system: no element in the old system remains unaffected, nor can any element of the old system be identified with an element of the new system. In the same way, at the synchronous level, different language systems must be dissimilar, in a global, not in a local way (Saussure 1972: ch.II).

On the other hand, saussurean LR is modest. In his view, lexicalised concepts only compartmentalize the mass of thought. Unlike prototypical concepts, they do not represent theory-laden conceptions, like natural class concepts, in which some features are prominent due to their theoretical or cultural importance. As in Gabelentz’ example, language serves as a medium to communicate elements of the amorphous mass. We want to communicate, for example, the instrumental relation that is worded by *by* in English and by *met (with)* in Dutch. Or we want to refer to the animal named *sheep* in English and *mouton* in French. In both cases, we communicate the same content. The only difference concerns the content elements that are also covered by the relevant sound elements. The different compartmentalizations are like different maps of a continent. The content area is stable; different boundaries only create different “togetherness” relations. At best, these correspond to modest cognitive differences. Deep-grained differences in worldview, as in stronger varieties of LR, are not at issue.

Saussure’s idea of mental life as a uniform and amorphous mass, only structured by the value system of a language, has been criticized as vague, unrealistic and epistemologically naive. Even for Saussure himself, this view is not all-comprising. When we talk about the “same element”, worded differently in different languages, this implies the natural availability of non-amorphous conceptual content which is not related to one unique language. In Saussure’s terms, next to “valeurs”, which reveal the boundaries on the map, we also have “significations”, which reveal information about the area itself (see note 8). Other elements in the *Cours* suggesting that there is more to mental life than a compartmentalized mass are the following:

(i) Saussure’s (anti-relativistic) remark that absence of a word in a language does not imply absence of knowledge of its referents, is illustrated by the example of the verb “to plow”. Saussure assumes that the speakers of Asiatic languages lacking this word, may have known about plowing (Saussure 1972: 308). Given the conscious character and complexity of this action, there must have been a non-lexicalized concept ‘plowing’ as well.

(ii) Saussure’s view that elements of linguistic substance (unlike elements of linguistic form) can survive over time, implies the existence of conceptual contents that are not tied up with a unique language. There is, for example, the “thought substance” corresponding to first-person pronouns meaning ”I”, which “finds” some structural position in a chronological series of language systems, but each time with a different “value”.

Saussure’s variety of LR can be summarized as follows. On the one hand, his general view of language has strong LR implications. Language is the main factor determining thought systems. Total systems of language and thought are involved, which do not share common

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7 Saussure compares the language system with a game like chess, or a monetary system. These are also self-contained systems which, like languages, consist of mutually dependent entities with conventional values. These comparisons strongly suggest that Saussure sees languages as systems available to us for some purposes, but not themselves embodying worldviews/conceptual schemes. Worldviews as well as conceptual schemes contain or imply propositional knowledge (about what the world is like, about basic ontological and/or epistemological categories, about natural classes etc.), games and monetary systems do not contain these types of propositional knowledge.

8 Saussure agrees with this. He says that, in this case, sheep and mouton have the same signification. But their (purely differential) value remains different (Saussure 1972: 158-160).

elements. Problems of unbridgeable gaps between language-thought systems, untranslatability etc., inherent in stronger types of LR, certainly apply to Saussure’s LR variety. On the other hand, saussurean LR is extremely weak. Language only maps mental life in a conventional way. It does not determine intellectual and cultural worldviews, as is usually the case in stronger types of LR.

We can predict now, that scholars like Weisgerber and Trier, who exhibit a strong LR profile in this sense, and also adopt a saussurean approach, can only do so by deviating from the strict saussurean LR perspective. This is indeed what occurs. In the next section, I turn to these strong LR varieties.

3. How “saussurean” is the linguistic relativism of Weisgerber and Trier?

3.1. Weisgerber

As Ehlers (2000) clearly shows, Saussure’s work strongly influenced Weisgerber’s work. When we look at his inhaltbezogene Grammatik, the central saussurean idea of language as compartmentalization mechanism of sound and thought appears as a stable and central element. On the other hand, from the very beginning, Weisgerber wants to go further than Saussure in two respects:

a) The scope of the saussurean idea that language structures the thought content of a speech community is considerably extended, because for Weisgerber, “thought” includes “worldview”. Weisgerber states that “Saussure nicht in genügendem Umfang die Folgerungen herausarbeitet, die sich aus seiner grundsätzlich richtigen Auffassung der Sprache als eines Kulturgutes ergeben (cf. Ehlers 2000: 58). For Weisgerber, this means that the modest compartmentalizing function of language has to be expanded into “eine Kraft geistiger Gestaltung”, in line with Humboldt’s concept of “energeia”. Only thus equipped, can language produce complete worldviews of nations, which is one of Weisgerber’s prominent themes.

b) Although Saussure adopts an institutional view of language, he does not elaborate this view into a strong and consistent ontological position. Weisgerber, in line with his strong position on language as a separate energy that impinges upon the mind, rejects Saussure’s wavering ontology and elaborates the idea of a separate “Zwischenwelt” (between sounds and referents) that contains the thought contents of a language. This world owes its existence to the language community to which it belongs. Along this line, Weisgerber develops his idea of language as an “Objectivgebilde”, fundamentally rooted in a “Gesamtkultur”.

Not surprisingly, Weisgerber can only fulfill his neo-humboldtian program by abandoning some central saussurean principles. The dynamic “Kraft” ideology can survive only in a climate that rejects the strict synchrony-diachrony distinction. Similarly, the aim of “reading” the worldview of a language community from its language, can only be realized if language shows more than compartmentalizations.

A clear illustration of both aspects is Weisgerber’s theory about “die Akkusativierung des Menschen” (Weisgerber 1957/58). Weisgerber observes that a language change is taking place in modern German use of case forms: instead of “Ich liefere ihm die Butter”, the formulation “Ich beliefere ihn mit Butter” is becoming more frequent. This change is interpreted as a

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10 Saussurean LR does not contradict Saussure’s explicit or inferred anti-relativism discussed above, because this anti-relativism criticizes other varieties of LR than Saussure’s.

11 Ehlers (2000) also shows that Weisgerber himself, in his later publications, seems to want to play down Saussure’s influence.

12 This caused a well-known interpretation problem. Some authors attribute a psychologistic position to Saussure, others interpret his view sociologically.
change in the interpretation of the person who received the butter. Datives are assumed to indicate people who are personally involved in the activity, accusatives are assumed to indicate passive objects. So this change from dative to accusative would show that this person is increasingly referred to as a lifeless object, which, in turn, should be due to depersonalizing tendencies in modern society.

This conclusion is, of course, only possible when, contrary to Saussure’s views, (i) prototypical meanings are allowed. When dative and accusative simply divide an amorphous area of semantic relations, and this division undergoes a change, no conceptual consequence should be drawn. There is simply an extension of the area covered by the accusative (cf. Gabelentz’ remark about “see”).

(ii) the synchrony-diachrony distinction is abandoned. Weisgerber’s description of the situation after the alleged language change draws on the meanings of dative and accusative that are solely derived from the earlier situation. This is exactly the “genetic fallacy” that Saussure (and Gabelentz) combatted.

In sum, Weisgerber turns out to have borrowed the central idea of language as a self-contained system from Saussure. But, in order to develop his own variety of LR, which Saussure would never have adopted, he had to abandon some main saussurean tenets, and return to 19th-century patterns of reasoning.

3.2. Trier

In a sense, Trier’s *Wortfeldtheorie* is very close to Saussure’s central idea about the language system. Trier elaborates the idea of a purely differential lexicon for several areas, for example the ‘knowledge’ area, which consists of words meaning “knowledge”, “wisdom”, “erudition” etc. (cf. Trier 1973: 79-93). Strictly relying upon Saussure’s views, he develops a theory in which semantic areas are prior to separate lexical elements. Words appear as mutually dependent elements of the area; they “result” from the mapping devices that create the boundaries. The fact that Trier operates within separate areas and not in the language system as a whole does not undermine the saussurean character of his approach. Despite his principled holism, Saussure also demonstrates his differential view of the lexicon only in a piecemeal way (see the *mouton/sheep* examples).

Trier takes the distinction between synchrony and diachrony very seriously. If *Feldeinteilung* (“area division”) II, follows *Feldeinteilung* I, both situations must be investigated independently and synchronically, before they can be compared. (Trier 1973: 51).

Nevertheless, Trier’s general view of language study as *Geistesgeschichte* and as a means to attain insights into successive worldviews of language communities, makes it necessary for him to deviate from his saussurean principles. When the historical development of the ‘knowledge’ area is described and embedded in general intellectual history throughout centuries of European civilization, there is much more at issue than boundary rearrangements.

Firstly, the area of mental life itself is no longer uniform; secondly, the concepts are subject to prototypical change; and thirdly, history fulfills an explanatory function (Trier 1973:120).

In a late publication (Trier 1973: 188-200), Trier seems to realize how much his research practice deviated from Saussure’s principles. He emphasizes Saussure’s importance for his

13 The concept ‘Wortfeld’ was originally developed by Ipsen. It was adopted and elaborated by several scholars (among whom Weisgerber) in slightly different ways, but most extensively by Trier. The general current of *Inhaltbezogene Grammatik* (to which both Weisgerber and Trier are taken to belong) remained restricted to Germany (cf. Helbig 1974: ch.4).

14 Of course, the status of the *Wortfelder* and the criteria upon which they are distinguished is problematic from a saussurean point of view. This is only one of the aspects of Trier’s theory that are amply criticized. Another problem is, of course, the very notion of words as sub-areas of a larger area. Actually, this idea can only be strictly applied in very special areas, such as evaluation scales consisting of grade words: excellent- good-sufficient- insufficient –bad (cf. Trier 1973: 45).
work from the very beginning, but avows that he was unable to respect Saussure’s non-
allowance of mixing synchrony and diachrony. He also modifies the idea of purely
differential word meanings in favour of prototypical word meanings.
In sum, Trier’s *Wortfeldtheorie* is only partially saussurean, and gives rise to a variety of LR
that Saussure would never have adopted.

4. The saussurean character of epistemological relativism
In the previous sections, Saussure turned out to be consistent in his rejection of LR varieties
that are based upon reasoning patterns incompatible with his general view of language. But
this very view also gives rise to a special, saussurean LR variety. LR varieties developed by
linguists who allegedly adopt Saussure’s general view of language, however, turned out to be
only partially saussurean. These linguists adopt Saussure’s holistic, self-contained view of
language, from which, in one sense, strong LR claims can be deduced: it is the conceptual
system *in its totality* that is “affected” by the structure imposed on it by language. Therefore,
there can be no item-to-item identity between various language-thought systems. Not
surprisingly, this view was welcomed by neo-humboldtian scholars, who were inclined to
believe in linguistically/ethnically determined worldviews.
On the other hand, Saussure’s purely differential view of language and thought turned out to
cover only part of the linguistic/conceptual space. Other parts, to which saussurean LR
linguists are inclined to appeal, remain uncovered. Thus, Saussure’s view seems to be realistic
for grammatical meanings of, e.g., prepositions and case endings, and for restricted and well-
structured areas of the lexicon (evaluation terms, colour terminology). Many aspects of the
language/thought area, however, are not covered by this view (prototypical meanings/concepts, “significations”(to be distinguished from semantic “values”), non-
lexicalized concepts). Moreover, the rather piecemeal character of the areas of application
turns the initial idea of a structure that covers the whole of language and mental life into a
purely theoretical thought construction.

When we turn to epistemological relativism (ER), we may expect to find similar
results. The alleged saussurean character of ER may also be based upon the holistic character
of Saussure’s general theory rather than upon his purely differential view of meaning and
thought, which cannot be generally applied. After a brief discussion of ER and its relation to
LR, we will see whether this expectation is justified for the alleged saussurean character of
Kuhn’s variety of ER.

4.1 Epistemological relativism. The relation between ER and LR
Like LR, ER is a multifarious phenomenon, perhaps even more so. Instead of language
controls mental life, we have now X controls human knowledge. From Antiquity onwards,
“X” has been conceived of in different ways, varying from mankind in general, through
culture, history, economy, to individual persons. Furthermore, like in LR, there are different
degrees of “control”, and various aspects of human knowledge are regarded as determined by
X.

When X is language, ER is a subcategory of LR. In many 20th-century varieties of ER,
X consists of conceptual frameworks (referred to in different ways, “paradigms” being one of
them) which are assumed to be mirrored in language. It is this type of ER, and especially
Kuhn’s theory of paradigms, that has been associated with Saussure’s theory of language.
Before exploring this alleged relationship, some differences between ER and LR should be
emphasized. Whatever variety of LR one considers, it is always differences between natural

15 In the latter case, the thesis is called subjectivism.
languages that are assumed to determine mental differences. In ER, these differences are never thought relevant. Different conceptual schemes may be, and often are verbalized in one natural language, e.g. English. The linguistic aspect of ER consists of lexical-semantic differences between various conceptual frameworks, mostly frameworks of natural science. For example, Kuhn, when dealing with the transition of Aristotle’s cosmological framework to Copernicus’s framework, shows that this involves a simultaneous change in the meaning of central terms like planet and move.

Such intralinguistic differences are also relevant in various types of LR. In particular Saussure’s view of language systems allows for a relativistic interpretation of different stages of one natural language, due to his interpretation of value changes as rearrangements of the total system, i.e. as bringing about the birth of a new system. We observed that Trier actually investigated the development of some lexical areas in German, which he related to developments in thought and culture. This resembles Kuhn’s comparison of successive paradigm-bound lexical systems. On the other hand, we have to realize that LR may cover aspects of language never affected by ER, e.g. morphology and grammar. Neither does ER ever claim to cover the language system as a whole.

Nevertheless, various scholars who adopted ER have equated this with LR. They observed a parallelism between the “language of science” as a self-contained system and similar views of natural languages. Not surprisingly, it is not Saussure, but Whorf who is discussed in this context, for example by Feyerabend. Whorf’s work is the most obvious and well-known defence of LR ever. Moreover, the aspects of mental life correlated to language by Whorf are of the natural science type. They cover the basic concepts of space, time and number.

The alleged relationship between Saussure and Kuhn is different. Kuhn himself does not present any link between his views and Saussure. Other scholars have drawn the parallel.

4.2 Kuhn and Saussure

Kuhn’s main work The structure of scientific revolutions (1962) can itself be regarded as revolutionary. Although neither ER, nor the idea that knowledge is embedded in conceptual frameworks was really new, Kuhn’s application of these ideas to natural science was certainly new. Central elements are his distinction between normal science (practised within and dependent on a paradigmatic framework) and revolutionary science, resulting in the acceptance of a new paradigm, and his conclusion that paradigms cannot be compared from a “neutral” point of view.

During the last decades, several scholars have undertaken to compare Kuhn and Saussure. They observe a similarity between Saussure’s self-contained language systems and Kuhn’s self-contained paradigms. Kuhn’s purely synchronic approach in analyzing paradigms as coherent systems is stressed (Psaty & Inui 1991:349). The alleged semantic “incommensurability” of paradigms is related to the saussurean view of language systems,

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16 An exception may be logic. As far as logical systems can be interpreted as conceptual frameworks, there is, for example, a correlation between different frameworks and different meanings of connectives. Many recent varieties of ER (e.g. Kuhn’s variety) only deal with lexical elements that belong to the sciences. Foucault’s relativism covers a larger portion of the lexicon.

17 I do not consider Quine’s radical holism as an exception, because this view (as developed in Quine 1960) does not assume fixed meanings of items at all. Conceptual frameworks, which do fix some meanings, can, in a sense, be regarded as devices to render holism workable (Cf. Elffers 1991: ch.5)

18 Whorf argues, for example, that European languages do not embody the basic concepts of modern quantum physics, whereas Hopi language does. Remarkably, in discussions of the ER-LR relation, implications of such ideas about natural languages for the language to be used by scientists are not considered.

19 In Kuhn (1970: vi), Whorf is briefly mentioned.
which also implies the impossibility of item-to–item translation between elements of successive systems (cf. Soler 2004). Saussure’s view of language change is equated with Kuhn’s view of paradigm change (Harris 1983: 393).

Undoubtedly, there are similarities between the two “framework/system” concepts20. But the similarities turn out to be superficial when we take a closer look at the compared entities. For example, Psaty & Inui (1991) refers to an 18th-century paradigmatic change in chemistry, which they present in a saussurean way, as a new division of the conceptual space. Before Dalton, the substances that we now call “solutions” belonged to the category “compounds”; after Dalton, solutions were categorized as “mixtures”. Of course, this change would never have constituted a scientific revolution—which it did—had it consisted of just this re-labelling. Kuhn’s exposition of this paradigm change clearly reveals the deep-grained theoretical change that occurred and its forceful impact on the concepts “compound” and “mixture” themselves. Features, once thought prototypical (e.g. “observable homogeneity”) gave way to features related to modern atomic theory. Not surprisingly, Kuhn himself denies that the new categorization of solutions is “only a matter of definition” (Kuhn 1970: 130-135).

Similarly, the description of paradigm change presented in Harris (1983: 393) appeals to problems and observed inadequacies in the earlier paradigm. His view of language change is similar. It is set in motion by the “pressure of reality: when one feels a conflict between concepts and direct experience, one looks for ways of modifying, qualifying or replacing the signs which seem inadequate”.

In both examples, the alleged equation can only be maintained when there is more to semantics than the saussurean conventional division of an amorphous thought mass. Only if meanings are related to theory-laden, theoretically changeable, prototypical concepts, can the complex semantic effects of conceptual change (in science and in other areas) be accounted for, and can ER be related to ideas about language systems in a more than superficial way. Psaty & Inui seem to deny that this extended semantics is necessary, thereby misrepresenting Kuhn’s view of paradigm change. Harris, on the other hand, presents this extended semantics as saussurean: Saussure’s “amorphous mass” is supplied by and put in relation to “our experience of extra-linguistic reality”21. In this case it is Saussure who is misrepresented.

5. Conclusion

As in the case of LR, the alleged saussurean character of ER turns out to be mainly based upon the holistic character of Saussure’s view of language systems, rather than upon his purely differential view of meaning and thought. In both cases, a more complex and reality-related semantics is necessary to account for the central phenomena of interest for defenders of LR and ER, so that their views are “saussurean” only in a superficial sense. Some anti-relativistic ideas, directed against 19th-century varieties of LR, however, can actually be characterized as saussurean.

20 Neither of the scholars who deal with the Saussure-Kuhn similarity discusses the problem, referred to in note 18, that cognitive consequences of natural languages are more drastic than average ER views. A really saussurean type of incommensurability would, for example, prohibit any understanding.

21 Harris naively defends his interpretation by saying that Saussure nowhere denies the dependence of language to non-linguistic fact. Saussure’s non-philosophical, strictly linguistic approach would explain the fact “that he seems to have felt no reason to look beyond or behind the pre-lingual cloud of thoughts he described as jumbled and shapeless”(p.288). In a footnote to his observation that Saussure “slighted both the primacy of our experience of extra-linguistic data and the diachronic process of creative change that results from stretching language to capture that experience”, Harris remarks that semantic change, unlike phonetic change, did not interest Saussure.
References


