
Article

Saussure and Fixed Codes

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Abstract

According to Roy Harris, Saussure bases his theory of language on *circuit de la parole*, which is called speech circuit. If Harris is right, then we will need telementation and a fixed code for speech circuit to be realized in linguistic communication. But Harris insists that it is doubtful whether telementation and a fixed code are plausible for successful communication. Nevertheless, this assumption has been passed on since ancient times down to the present day in various forms. So if telementation and a fixed code contradict real communication, then modern linguistics will be forced to be drastically rewritten somehow or other.

Key Words: speech circuit, telementation, fixed code, metaphor

Introduction

Every theory has its own assumption. Saussure's theory of language is no exception. What is the assumption of Saussure's theory? According to Harris, it is *circuit de la parole* (speech circuit as he calls it). The speech circuit is based on telementation and a fixed code, both of which are head and tail of the same coin. How have these two ideas emerged in intellectual history? They have their roots in Aristotle, whose explanation of metaphor, however, makes us skeptical about fixed codes. In any case, they have been passed on down to the present day. If Harris is right, how can modern linguistics guarantee the validity of its research on language?

1. Telementation

First of all, Harris takes up Saussure's 'speech circuit':

The starting point of the circuit [*circuit de parole*]

is in the brain of one (person), call him A, where [...] concepts, are associated with representations of linguistic signs or acoustic images, [...]. [...] a given concept triggers in the brain a corresponding acoustic image: [...] the brain transmits to the organs of phonation an impulse corresponding to that image; then sound waves are propagated from A's mouth to B's ear [...]. Next, the circuit continues in B in inverse order: from ear to brain [...] in the brain, the psychological association of this image with the corresponding concept. If B speaks in turn, this new act will follow—from his brain to A's—exactly the same progression as the first, and will pass through the same consecutive phases ... (Saussure, 1922: 28; author's [Harris's] translation). (Harris 1978: 142)

Here, between A and B, A's thought can be transferred from A to B and vice versa. So Harris calls Saussure's 'speech circuit' a 'telementational process.' The model of communication by Saussure is also called the 'transport studies' model (Harris

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1978: 142).

According to Harris, the ancestry of Saussure's 'speech circuit' model of communication is the 'translation theory' of understanding by John Locke:

For Locke, understanding what you hear another man says is simply a mirror image of what happens when you express an idea aloud by speaking. Hence the expression 'translation theory' of understanding. Understanding is explained as translating back into ideas what had previously been translated from ideas into sounds. Men talk, says Locke, 'only that they may be understood; which is then only done when, by use or consent, the sound I make by the organs of speech excites in another man's mind who hears it the idea I apply to it in mine when I speak it' (Locke, 1690). (Harris 1983: 153-154)

According to Harris, Descartes also takes telementation to be not merely the *normal function* of linguistic communication but a *necessary condition* of linguistic communication, and moreover, Descartes thinks that no communication system which is not used for telementation counts as a language:

Two points about Descartes' position on animal behaviour are worth emphasizing in the present context. The first is its connexion with the traditional Western assumption that linguistic communication involves a process of telementation. In effect, Descartes presents a more rigorous and intransigent formulation of the telementational doctrine than any of his predecessors. He is highly critical of compromises (such as Montaigne's) which would attribute to animals a lesser form of telementation, based on the supposition that animals might have 'languages' which human beings simply do not understand. For Descartes, whatever form animal communication may take it cannot constitute *linguistic* communication because animals do not have minds, and consequently have no thoughts which could possibly be the subject of telementational transference from one member of the species to another. To maintain this, clearly, is to take telementation to be not merely the *normal*

function of linguistic communication but a *necessary condition* of linguistic communication; and an immediate corollary is that no communication system which is not used for telementation counts as a language. This dogmatic Cartesian distinction between language and other modes of communication survives into the twentieth century in some surprising theoretical guises. It underlies, for example, psychological theories of children's language acquisition such as Vygotsky's, which assumes that up to a certain stage in the child's development 'thought' and 'speech' are independent, and that 'true' language is acquired at the nexal point when 'thought becomes verbal and speech rational'. (Harris 1987b: 30)

Moreover, the telementation model, Harris insists, is taken over by a transformationalist fifty years after the publication of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916):

[...] linguistic communication consists in the production of some external, publicly observable, acoustic phenomenon whose phonetic and syntactic structure encodes a speaker's inner, private thoughts or ideas and the decoding of the phonetic and syntactic structure exhibited in such a physical phenomenon by other speakers, in the form of an inner private experience of the same thoughts or ideas (Katz 1966: 98). (Harris 1978: 143)

Moreover, Saussure's telementation theory of communication, Harris says (Harris 1990d: 27-28), has been passed on to the present day as in Denes and Pinson (1963: 4-7), Katz (1966: 103-4), Chafe (1970: 15), and Cairns and Cairns (1976: 17-18).

Thus, according to Harris, telementation has been the key concept in linguistics. But Harris points out that telementation has just an implicit assumption.

Next, we shall consider fixed codes, which are an assumption of telementation.

2. Fixed Codes

As we have seen, according to Harris, Saussure adopted telementation as his theory of communication. Telementation is the theory which

explains communication as the transference of thoughts from one person's mind to another person's mind. Furthermore Harris points out that 'This simple scenario [telementation] assumes that A and B are speaking the same language (Harris 1990d: 26):

Speech communication, on this view, is essentially a process of telementation, or thought-transference. The same thoughts may be transferred from A's mind to B's or from B's mind to A's via exactly the same linguistic procedures; (Harris 1990d: 27)

Here Harris says that the 'speech circuit' model assumes the same language, that is, a fixed code:

[...] if speech communication is a telementational process, it demands a fixed code which A and B share. If A and B do not share this fixed code, [...] then speech communication between them must at some point break down, [...] (Harris 1990d: 30)

Also, Harris insists from a different viewpoint that

[...] once any theorist adopts a telementation theory of communication, [...] the inevitable result is that it leaves only one option open for explaining what a language is. The only option open is to construe a language as a fixed code, the fixed code known to both A and B. (Harris 1990d: 28-29)

Harris says the same thing as the above from another different perspective again:

[...] construing a language as a fixed code is demanded by the internal logic of Saussure's speech circuit [telementation model of communication]. Unless the code is fixed, then invoking linguistic knowledge simply does not explain how speech communication works. Given any utterance by A, it is essential that B must not only recognize this utterance as an example of the words A intended to pronounce, but must also attach to those words the same meaning as A does. Otherwise speech communication between A and B necessarily breaks down. (Harris 1990d: 29)

Moore and Carling say the same thing as this, pointing out that Saussure's *langue* (a fixed code) is shared by language users:

Saussure argued that language could be separated from local instances of language in use and viewed as a system, self-contained and common to all language users. That system Saussure called 'langue'; the task of the linguist he saw as characterising 'langue'—the linguistic system [a fixed code] which language users might be said to share. (Moore and Carling 1982: 64)

Once Saussure's idea is accepted, Harris claims, then extra-linguistic factors are eliminated from communication:

Now if that is indeed the right way to look at language, then of course it follows that the material circumstances in which linguistic activity takes place are of no significance. How such circumstances vary cannot affect, except in superficial and incidental ways, the nature of what is taking place, since it is always the internalized system [the fixed code] of sound-meaning correlations which determines what *can* take place. The theory of language itself implicitly dismisses communication as a mere by-product of something more permanent and more basic, the system of linguistic knowledge [the fixed code]. (Harris 1978: 143)

So Harris summarizes the relationship between a telementation theory and a fixed code as follows:

[...] if speech communication is a telementation process, it demands a fixed code which A and B share. If A and B do not share this fixed code, [...] then speech communication between them must at some point break down, [...] So the theoretical assumption must be that, somehow or other, those who manage to communicate with each other via speech share and operate a fixed code, [...] The fixed code is their common language. In this sense, languages take priority over speakers, and over speech: linguistics is thus envisaged as a science primarily concerned, both in general and in

particular cases, with analysing languages, which in turn are assumed to be the fixed codes underlying all successful speech communication.

(Harris 1990d: 30)

Then, what does the fixed-code theory bring about?

[...] the fixed-code theory leads straight to what may be called the 'paradox of inquiry'. [...] A asks 'How many sides has a quadrilateral?' and B replies 'Four'. If A and B share the same fixed code, then A must already know the answer to the question; whereas in the alternative case A's question is one which it is impossible for B to understand correctly. It makes no difference in principle whether or not 'four' is the right answer, or how the word *quadrilateral* is defined. The point is that a fixed-code theory of speech communication must attribute exactly the same linguistic knowledge to A and B if communication is to be successful. On this theory, therefore, it is impossible for anyone to come to know the meaning of a word by asking another person. But this conclusion is paradoxical, since asking the meaning of a word is commonly held to be a normal and unproblematic function of speech communication; and furthermore this function is generally regarded as essential for the usual processes of language-learning. (Harris 1990d: 32-33)

Moreover, Harris insists that if speech communication is based on a fixed code, then linguistic innovation will be impossible:

[...] if the speech circuit depends on the operation of a fixed code then innovation becomes a theoretical impossibility. If A attempts to introduce a new word, B will certainly fail to understand it since *ex hypothesi* the word is not part of the code they share. On the other hand, if either A or B can introduce innovations which are communicationally successful, then the code is not fixed.

(Harris 1990d: 34)

Furthermore, Harris ironically says that if Saussure's theory of communication is correct, then

his *Cours de linguistique générale* should have been incomprehensible:

The failure to deal with it [linguistic innovation] has a particular irony, since the development of linguistics has been heavily dependent on the introduction of new terminology, and Saussure's *Cours [de linguistique générale]* itself is a case in point. The work should have been incomprehensible if the theory of communication it advances is correct.

(Harris 1990d: 34)

Moreover, if Saussure's idea of telementation and fixed codes is correct, linguistic misunderstanding will not happen between one person and another. In other words, misunderstanding takes place in linguistic communication because we do not have the same common fixed code.

Also, telementation and a fixed code cannot explain why we understand puns, which are relevant to polysemy and homonymy. To add one more example, Saussure's theory of communication cannot elucidate the mechanism of irony, which is very common in our daily life. Needless to say, telementation and a fixed code cannot explain even why we understand jokes. As Harris rightly points out, it is a bitter joke that if Saussure is right, then his lecture, *Cours de linguistique générale* will be incomprehensible to readers.

Furthermore, the fixed-code theory poses a question of how *la langue* comes into existence:

[...] if speech communication is indeed based on a fixed code shared by speakers and hearers it becomes extremely difficult to explain in any plausible way how the fixed code comes to be established in the first place. [...] The larger the community the less chance there is that any two individuals will have had the same opportunity to acquire exactly the same set of correlations between forms and meanings for purposes of communication. [...] In other words, the fixed code with which A operates is presumably the unique product of A's individual linguistic experience, [...] But this conclusion contradicts the telementational account of speech communication itself; for we are left without

the essential guarantee that A and B share one and the same fixed code. (Harris 1990d: 33)

Moreover, the speech circuit depending on a fixed code produces conflict between the demands of a fixed code and the possibility of linguistic change.

Furthermore, it seems either that linguistics cannot deal with real languages or that if it does it cannot be dealing with fixed codes:

If linguistics deals with synchronic speech-systems (or *étas de langue* in Saussurean terminology), and these systems are fixed codes, then they do not correspond to 'languages' in the everyday sense in which English, French, and German are reckoned to be the languages typically spoken by most people born and brought up in, say, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. These are *not* fixed codes, whatever else they may be, because they are manifestly not uniform. Smith's English may not be the same as Brown's English. The French spoken by Dupont may differ from the French spoken by Duval. Such differences may affect not only pronunciation but grammar and vocabulary as well. Yet Smith is a native speaker of English, just as Brown is; and Dupont is a native speaker of French, just as Duval is. Thus it appears *prima facie* either that linguistics cannot deal with languages like English, French, and German; or if it does it cannot be dealing with fixed codes. (Harris 1990d: 35)

Furthermore, according to Harris, it is wrong that most linguists assume that idealizations in linguistics (including a fixed code) are necessary when they study languages:

The fixed code and the homogenous speech community, it is claimed, are merely theoretical idealizations, which it is necessary for linguistics to adopt, just as other sciences adopt for theoretical purposes idealizations which do not correspond to the observable facts. [...] They [the ideal speech community, the ideal language, and the ideal speaker-hearer] are neither abstractions to which items and processes in the real world may be regarded as approximating for purposes of

calculation; nor are they models held up for purposes of exemplification or emulation. (Harris 1990d: 37)

Next, we shall consider Aristotle's fixed-code theory, which is the predecessor of Saussure's.

3. Metaphor

Furthermore, according to Harris, Aristotle implicitly admits that a fixed-code theory, on which Saussure's theory is based, contradicts his own idea that words are associated with concepts, explaining metaphor (in his *Poetics*):

Metaphor is transference of an alien term: transference from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or by analogy. I mean by "from genus to species," for example, "This is my ship *standing* here"; lying at anchor is a kind of standing. "From species to genus" is exemplified in "Odysseus did a *thousand* splendid deeds"; for thousand, which is used here instead of many, is a species of many. "From species to species" is exemplified in "*drawing off* his life with the bronze" and "*cutting* with the tireless bronze"; drawing off means cutting, and cutting means drawing off, both being species of "taking away."

Analogy means that the second term stands to the first in the same relation as the fourth to the third. (And sometimes people add that to which the term supplanted is relative.) For example, a cup is to Dionysus what a shield is to Ares; one can speak therefore of the cup as "the shield of Dionysus," and of the shield as "the cup of Ares." Again, old age is to life as evening is to day: one speaks therefore of evening as "the old age of day" or as Empedocles put it; and one can speak of old age as "the evening, or sunset, of life." There are cases where some of the terms have no name, but metaphor by analogy can still be used. For example, to scatter seed is to sow, but here is no name for what the sun does with its fire. However, this action is to the sun what sowing is to seed, and so we have the expression "sowing the god-created flames."

There is also another way of using metaphor. One can call the thing by an alien name and then deny it an attribute peculiar to the name. This would be

the case if you spoke of the shield not as “the cup of Ares” but as “the wineless cup.”

(Aristotle 2003: 482–483)

So metaphor not only denies Aristotle’s idea [a fixed code] that words are associated with concepts but also calls into question Saussure’s fixed-code theory.

Harris comments on Aristotle’s account of metaphor as follows:

It is no coincidence that Aristotle, who was the first scholar to make any serious attempt to explain metaphor, was also one of the founders of a fixed-code theory of languages. For from a fixed-code perspective, metaphor is an aberration. It involves an ‘improper’ use of words. It applies terms to cases where they are not strictly or ‘literally’ applicable. It is a semantic deviation.

It is significant that Aristotle’s account of metaphor occurs in his *Poetics*, which already classifies it implicitly as characteristic of a rather exceptional kind of discourse. His explanation constitutes the first known attempt to formulate a theory of semantic transference:

Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy. (*Poetics* 21) (Harris 1998: 89)

So Harris criticizes Aristotle’s explanation of metaphor, pointing out that a fixed code is not fixed:

The underlying logic of this explanation is typical of fixed-code semantics. First we have the assumption that a determinate correlation between names and things is already in place, such that each name has an identified thing ‘belonging’ to it. Second, we have the assumption that metaphor disrupts these correlations by giving a thing the ‘wrong’ name, i.e. a name that rightly belongs to some other thing. Third, we have the assumption that nevertheless this transference is systematic in some way, and an explanation of the phenomenon

will consist in demonstrating its systematicity (genus to species, species to genus, etc.). Aristotle does not apparently see—or is not prepared to admit—that his first three categories of transfer are actually special cases of the fourth and most general: analogy. For if this were admitted, the systematicity would disappear, and one would be left with a conclusion intolerable to fixed-code theorists; namely, that the fixed code is not actually fixed. For users alter its name-thing correlations at will, as it tickles their fancy to do so. (Harris 1998: 89–90)

By the way, according to Harris, Saussure’s ‘speech circuit’ leads to his distinction between overt verbal behaviour, *la parole* and *la langue*, which is the system of arbitrary conventions constituted by pairings between *signifiés* (concepts) and *signifiants* (sound images). Furthermore, Harris points out that Aristotle also attempts to treat metaphor as a matter of *parole* (use), not of *langue* (a fixed code):

Aristotle’s location of this discussion in the *Poetics* also suggests that (to put the matter with deliberate anachronism) he wants to treat metaphor as a matter of *parole*, not of *langue*. Which is another favourite segregationalist escape route for dealing with recalcitrant ‘data’. This might be plausible if it were only poets or other eccentrics who indulged in such linguistics perversities. But what is even more disturbing for fixed-code semantics is that apparently deviations like metaphor can eventually worm their way into the code itself. Mountains do not have feet, but no eyebrows are raised when someone speaks of the ‘foot of the Matterhorn’. Nor does it cause us any problem to work out what kind of animal a ‘human guinea-pig’ might be. Worse still, as soon as we start looking for metaphors we find them all over the place. They suddenly appear in even the most banal and commonplace of utterances. (Harris 1998: 90)

So Harris insists that the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical is the distinction between *langue* (the code) and *parole* (its use), pointing out that the distinction is head and tail of the same coin:

The core problem here is, again, one generated by the fixed-code doctrine itself; the problem being that the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical melts away when we try to draw it in any systematic or rigorous way. (How many metaphors does the preceding sentence include?) And this problem in turn relates to another; what also melts away is the elusive distinction between the code and its use, between *langue* and *parole*. When we adopt an integrational perspective, we see that in fact these two difficulties are head and tail of the same theoretical coin. (Harris 1998: 90)

Last of all, Harris insists that metaphors are the same as language use in general. Toolan (1996) says that novelty in language use is the norm and that anything can mean anything in particular circumstances:

The recommended integrationist approach to metaphor will already be apparent from the foregoing discussion: its starting point is to question ‘whether metaphors are indeed different in kind from language use in general’, this being no more than a corollary of the integrationist view that ‘novelty in language use is the norm’ (Toolan, 1996, pp. 59–60). Once we accept that, contrary to what fixed-code theorists would have us believe, ‘anything can mean anything in particular circumstances’ (Toolan, 1996, p. 62), then the question for investigation is how those particular circumstances produce the pattern of integration that results in *something* meaning what it does. (Harris 1998: 90)

Toolan’s words remind us of Humpty Dumpty. Humpty Dumpty says to Alice the same thing as this in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*:

“And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There’s glory for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’ ” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’ ”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean a ‘nice knock-down

argument,’ ” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.” (Carroll 1960: 186)

Here Humpty Dumpty insists that he can make words mean what he wants them to. In other words, he denies the idea of the fixed-code theory, according to which we can only use words meaning what the theory determines. But in reality we can use words as we like. As Toolan says, “novelty in language use is the norm” and “anything can mean anything in particular circumstances.” Harris comments on Humpty Dumpty as follows:

Humpty Dumpty is perhaps the most famous champion of the thesis that words mean whatever the speaker wants them to. His argument with Alice about the meaning of the word *glory* has become a kind of symbolic anecdote in modern semantic theory. Humpty Dumpty’s thesis, patently, is quite unacceptable to the fixed-code theorist. In fixed-code semantics, it is the code that determines the meaning, not the speaker. And yet it seems undeniable that people do often ask others what they mean in order to clarify a remark; and undeniable that this is often a sensible strategy.

(Harris 1998: 71)

So, according to Harris, the English sentence, ‘*Pass the salt, please*’ can be interpreted, depending on various cultures:

From an integrationalist point of view, it would be fruitless to attempt to define the meaning of the words *Pass the salt, please* without reference to the ‘cultural prerequisites’, as Silverstein [1977] calls them. How complex these are, even in such a trivial case, emerges from the fact that we can imagine various cultures other than our own in which, for example, any one of the following language-games might regularly occur. 1. When Smith said *Pass*

the salt, please, Jones first removed the salt from the salt-cellar, poured it on to a napkin, folded the napkin and then handed the folded napkin to Smith. 2. When Smith said *Pass the salt, please*, Jones took the salt and sprinkled it on the food on Smith's plate. 3. When Smith said *Pass the salt, please*, Jones took the salt, and sprinkled it over Smith's head, shouting 'Abracadabra'. There is no need to multiply the hypothetical possibilities further. In these three imaginary cultures, the meaning of *Pass the salt, please* would be different; and in all three cultures it would be different from the meaning we understand *Pass the salt, please* to have in ours. From an integrationalist point of view, the meaning is inseparable from the language-game; and it is this view of meaning we have to adopt if we want to understand language as social interaction.

(Harris 1987a: 205)

Conclusion

According to Harris, Saussure bases his theory of communication on telementation (*circuit de la parole*), which is transference of thought from one person to another. Furthermore, telementation leads to a fixed code, which is *langue* in Saussure's terminology. In other words, telementation is based on a fixed code. This idea has been passed on from Aristotle down to the present day.

But in reality, linguistic communication does not consist of telementation. So extra-linguistic factors are involved in linguistic communication. Therefore, if communication is successful, then a fixed code is not fixed at all. We can communicate with each other using language, which serves us as a medium with extra-linguistic factors.

If Harris is right, do we need to reconsider how linguistic communication is successfully achieved?

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