

Taking it for Granted: Idioms Versus the Saussurean Model

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Introduction

In modern language, we use many expressions that seem self-evident. Their meaning appears obvious; and yet, these idiomatic expressions, so natural in use, remain among the most difficult linguistic phenomena to formalize. For a native speaker, the phrase "he stood me up" means that one has been left without a date. However, in these five words, there is no trace of this idea.

The tradition of modern linguistics seeks to formalize how meaning functions in language. It is from this perspective that the work of Ferdinand de Saussure stands out as an essential starting point. Although the Saussurean model allows for idiomatic expressions, it fails to fully account for their actual behavior.

This analysis first examines the foundations of the Saussurean model before comparing it to the behavior of idiomatic expressions. A third section outlines the avenues explored by more recent approaches. The conclusion draws out the theoretical implications.

Section I: Modern Linguistics According to Saussure

In his notes compiled for publication by his students under the title *Course in General Linguistics*,¹ Ferdinand de Saussure laid the foundations of modern linguistics. Through this work, Saussure developed a theory of language. This section presents his fundamental ideas.

¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. by Wade Baskin (Columbia University Press, 2011).

A. The linguistic sign

It is generally assumed that a word corresponds to a specific idea. Despite some exceptions, this model is often taken for granted. It then becomes tempting to conclude that the function of words is purely referential. According to this simplified model, one could imagine correspondences of the following type:

— *the word A designates the thing A;*

— *the word B designates thing B;*

- *etc.*

For Saussure, such a model is too simplistic and ignores the psychological nature of language. The two terms of the linguistic sign are linked by a mental association. These two terms are the concept and the acoustic image; both are psychological in nature.

Saussure does not offer a substantive definition of the concept. It is neither a representation of an object, nor an autonomous psychological entity, but a purely relational term, whose content is determined only in opposition to the other concepts of the system.

In contrast, Saussure is more precise regarding the acoustic image. He explains that the acoustic image is not the physical sound, but the psychological imprint of the sound, or the impression produced on the senses. The concept and the acoustic image are essential for defining the central object of linguistics for Saussure: the sign.

A linguistic sign is a psychological entity resulting from the association of a signified (the concept) and a signifier (the acoustic image). For example, in the English language, the

concept corresponding to "tree" is associated with the signifier "tree," which constitutes an acoustic image.

Two fundamental principles characterize the linguistic sign: the arbitrariness of the sign and the linearity of the signifier. The arbitrariness of the sign means that there is no necessary relationship between the signifier and the signified. The same idea can thus be associated with different acoustic images depending on the language: the concept of sister is expressed as "sister" in English and as "sœur" in French. This linguistic diversity is possible precisely because the link between signifier and signified is based on convention, and not on natural motivation. Once established within a given linguistic community, the sign becomes established among speakers and acquires relative stability.

The signifier, being auditory in nature, unfolds over time and exhibits a linear character. Saussure presents this second principle as self-evident, yet fundamental, and specifies that its weight is equal to that of the principle of arbitrariness. Together, these two principles play a structuring role in the functioning of language.

B. Value

After defining the linguistic sign as the association of a signifier and a signified, Saussure seeks to clarify how the units of language acquire their content. Contrary to a referential conception of language, according to which words derive their meaning from their correspondence with objects in the external world, Saussure maintains that the value of a

sign depends primarily on the relationships it maintains with the other signs in the language system.

Thus, a linguistic unit does not possess its own content independently of the other units in the system. It is defined solely by the oppositions it maintains with them. Language therefore appears not as a set of isolated terms, but as a structured system of oppositions. In this respect, Saussure distinguishes the meaning of a sign from its linguistic value. Meaning corresponds to the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the sign itself. Value, on the other hand, depends on the relationships that this sign maintains with the other signs in the system.

For example, the French word *mouton* and the English word *sheep* can refer to the same animal, but they do not have the same linguistic value, since English distinguishes between *sheep* and *mutton*, while French uses *mouton* in both cases.

Linguistic value concerns not only signifiers, but also signifieds. Concepts themselves do not pre-exist language as units already constituted independently of it. They are determined solely by the oppositions they maintain with other concepts in the system.

This differential conception of value also appears at the level of the signifier. It is therefore not the sounds themselves that are linguistically relevant, but the differences that allow us to distinguish them. Phonic units thus possess linguistic identity only within the system to which they belong.

For example, the French "r" in "bar" can be phonetically identical to the German "ch" in "Bach," without constituting the same linguistic unit. Therefore, it is not the physical properties of sounds that are relevant, but the oppositions they maintain in each language.

It is in this context that Saussure asserts that, in language, there are only differences without positive terms. This formula holds separately for the signifier and the signified. Considered as a whole, however, the linguistic sign constitutes a positive unit within the language system. Linguistic value thus results from the set of differential relations that structure language.

C. Language, community and temporality

According to Saussure, the social nature of language and its inscription in time determine the conditions of existence of the linguistic sign. The linguistic sign appears immutable to the speakers of a linguistic community because it is imposed by collective usage rather than chosen individually. Speakers cannot therefore freely modify the signs of the language. Language thus becomes an inheritance transmitted from one generation to the next, independently of the individual will of the speakers. Saussure explains the relative immutability of the linguistic sign by several factors.

First, the arbitrary nature of the sign protects language against any attempt at deliberate modification. Since there is no natural link between signifier and signified, speakers have no particular reason to prefer one form over another.

Secondly, a language consists of a very large number of signs. This multiplicity makes any systematic transformation difficult to achieve on the scale of the entire system.

Thirdly, language constitutes a complex system whose elements are interdependent. Any modification of a sign could affect the balance of the entire system.

Fourth, language is a social fact transmitted collectively from one generation to the next. It is thus imposed on speakers as an inheritance that they cannot modify individually.

The arbitrary nature of the sign thus reinforces the role of linguistic tradition. Lacking any natural link between signifier and signified, the sign can only be maintained through collective usage. Conversely, it is this dependence on tradition that ensures its stability over time.

However, this immutability does not preclude the possibility of linguistic change. Linguistic signs gradually transform during their transmission from one generation to the next, without these transformations resulting from a conscious decision by the speakers.

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Saussure demonstrates that language, because it is transmitted over time, is necessarily subject to change. These transformations affect the relationship between the signifier and the signified, which is progressively modified over time. As Saussure emphasizes, "time changes all things; there is no reason why language should escape this law."² Thus, while language may appear immutable to individual speakers, it is nevertheless subject to constant evolution under the effect of time and its collective transmission.

Section II: Idioms versus the Saussurean model

Building on the Saussurean model, we can now turn to idiomatic expressions. At first glance, the Saussurean model offers a framework compatible with these expressions. The

² Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 77.

sign is arbitrary—a necessary property for these expressions. Furthermore, idiomatic expressions constitute collective linguistic facts—they are shared, transmitted, and understood within a given community, which corresponds precisely to the Saussurean notion of language. Moreover, Saussure recognizes that the sign can correspond to a unit larger than an isolated word. However, his model provides no mechanism to explain why some expressions lose their idiomatic meaning under certain syntactic transformations while others retain it. Finally, the Saussurean principle of value by difference naturally applies to idiomatic expressions: the figurative meaning derives its strength precisely from its divergence from the literal meaning.

While the Saussurean model undeniably allows for the existence of idiomatic expressions, it does not predict their actual behavior. The following subsections explore the points of divergence between this model and the observed behavior of idioms.

A. The non-compositionality of idiomatic meaning

The Saussurean model assumes a fixed and stable correspondence between signifier and signified. However, this correspondence does not hold up in the face of the behavior of idiomatic expressions. Every idiomatic expression simultaneously carries a literal and a figurative meaning. Consider the already established example: "He stood me up."

Compositionally, the words in this expression produce a coherent literal meaning—someone stood me up. Yet, the idiomatic meaning—having been stood up for a date—is entirely absent from the individual components. The Saussurean model offers no mechanism to account for this dissociation between the compositional meaning and the actual meaning of the expression.

B. The gradual nature of idiomatic meaning

Saussure assumes that signs are discrete and stable—he does not admit the existence of a gradient. Yet, not all idiomatic expressions exist with the same degree of opacity.

Consider two examples: "to stand someone up" and "to be a pain in the neck." In the first case, no conceptual link connects the literal meaning—to stand someone up—to the figurative meaning—to abandon someone at a meeting. In the second case, however, a partial conceptual relationship exists between the literal meaning—to be a pain in the neck—and the figurative meaning—to bother someone—insofar as both imply a form of nuisance. These two expressions are idiomatic, but to different degrees. The Saussurean model, by treating signs as discrete units, offers no way to account for this variation.

C. Idioms at the language/speech interface

The Saussurean model treats language—the abstract system—and speech—concrete usage—as distinct and uninteracting entities. Yet, idiomaticity lies precisely at this boundary. Its meaning is encoded in language, but its behavior depends on usage. For example, the English idiom *kick the bucket* loses its idiomaticity in the passive voice: *the bucket was kicked*. However, under the same grammatical transformation, *break the ice* retains its idiomaticity: *the ice was broken*. This difference can only be explained by speech, not by the abstract system. This behavior is completely ignored by the model proposed by Saussure.

D. The role of context and pragmatics

Saussure acknowledges the social and collective dimensions of language—but only at the system level. He offers no model for how context, register, irony, and shared knowledge operate in actual language use. Idioms, however, depend precisely on these elements. The same idiom can function differently depending on the context and register. Although he recognizes the collective dimension of language, the Saussurean model remains blind to the pragmatic dimensions that idioms require.

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Saussure's great contribution was to treat language as an abstract and formal system—an important and necessary step for modern linguistics. However, idioms show that meaning does not reside entirely in the abstract system. Meaning is also found in pragmatic reality: context, usage, the space between speakers and communities. A suitable model of idiomatic language must formalize these pragmatic dimensions—something the Saussurean model cannot do.

Section III: Beyond Saussure

Since the Saussurean model proves insufficient to account for idiomatic expressions, theoretical alternatives are necessary. Construction grammar can address the problem of non-compositionality³ It locates meaning in constructions rather than in individual signs, thus allowing for form-meaning associations at different levels of abstraction. Idioms can

³ Adele E. Goldberg, *Constructions: a construction grammar approach to argument structure*, Cognitive theory of language and culture (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

be considered as a single construction with its own form-meaning association. With this model, the problem of non-compositionality is circumvented.

The work of Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow offers a more nuanced framework. These linguists propose that idiomatic expressions are characterized by six distinct dimensions: conventionality, inflexibility, figuration, proverbiality, informality, and affect.⁴Crucially, with the exception of conventionality, none of these dimensions necessarily applies to all idiomatic expressions. This observation captures precisely what the Saussurean model cannot model: idiomaticity is not binary, but varies along several independent dimensions. An expression can be more or less idiomatic depending on the number of these properties it exhibits and the degree to which it manifests them.

A computational approach is the next natural step. The theoretical frameworks proposed by construction grammar and by Nunberg et al. remain largely descriptive. For a model of idiomatic language to be fully adequate, it must be formalizable and computable.

Recent work in computational linguistics seeks precisely to operationalize these dimensions—to translate properties such as conventionality, inflexibility, and figuration into formal and testable representations. The formalization of a model allows for the formulation of demonstrable theorems, thus providing an explanatory rigor absent from purely descriptive approaches. Computability, for its part, guarantees that the model can be applied—it implies the tractability and operationalization of theoretical concepts. A complete computational model of idiomatic expressions would be the next natural step, but is beyond the scope of this work.

⁴ Geoffrey Nunberg et al., “Idioms,” *Language* 70, no. 3 (1994): 491, <https://doi.org/10.2307/416483>.

Conclusion

Idiomatic expressions may seem self-evident, but they constitute one of the most complex linguistic phenomena, the workings of which remain difficult to formalize. Linguistic models attempt to account for this behavior. However, the Saussurean model is not precise enough to explain them.

However, Saussure's fundamental contribution—treating language as an abstract and formal system—remains indispensable. What is needed is to extend this abstraction: to formalize what Saussure left to the realm of the concrete—context, usage, pragmatics—and integrate it into a rigorous and calculable model. The construction grammar and dimensions proposed by Nunberg et al. represent promising advances toward a better understanding of idiomatic expressions.

Idioms are probably the most complex type of expression in language. If a model cannot account for idioms, it remains fundamentally incomplete. Idiomatic meaning is not self-evident—it requires the full complexity of language, speakers, culture, and context to signify anything at all.

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